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THESIS

**AN ONTOLOGY OF POWER: PERCEPTION AND
REALITY IN CONFLICT**

by

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December 2016

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AN ONTOLOGY OF POWER: PERCEPTION AND REALITY IN CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

Strategy is a problematic yet often-invoked concept. This thesis explores the 2015 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS), philosophy, and social theory to develop an alternative framework for the formulation of strategy in the security domain. The 2015 NSS is analyzed for consistency in its concepts and categories. A model of strategic agency is proposed as an alternative framework for developing security strategy. The strategic agency model draws upon actor-network theory and utilizes a novel approach whereby ontology is conceived as a network of power relations. Strategic agency provides a mechanism whereby a perceiving self-observer (Strategos, the strategic agent) may identify, describe, and explain the behavior of other actors in the strategic environment. This thesis relates how the perspective of Strategos moves along a continuum of ontology and epistemology in framing its world, with implications for accurate modeling of social systems. A model for analytical use in strategy development is presented along with insights into how such a model might be employed for analytical, planning, and operational purposes.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANT	Actor-Network Theory
ESV	English Standard Version
GWOT	Global War on Terror
IC	(United States) Intelligence Community
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
LNA	Libyan National Army
NSS	National Security Strategy
ROC	Russian Orthodox Church
VSJ	Violent Salafi Jihadist
WMD	Weapon(s) of Mass Destruction

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A paramount value, such as survival versus extinction, cannot be cost estimated.

—Folke Dovring, *Knowledge and Ignorance: Essays on Lights and Shadows*

A. PREFACE

The turn to irregular warfare and counterterrorism in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has presented policy-makers and security and defense professionals with a new and challenging dynamic environment. How do strategies of intimidation and death emerge from those who would say they are fighting for their lives and livelihoods? If preventing death is our metric of success, then we are destined to fail. We must ask ourselves instead what it means to be alive, and what drives man to violence and to expend his life and the lives of others.

The *raison d'être* of strategy is neither to know nor conquer the world, but to *survive* it. To survive, each of us needs to know how to achieve our goals and to understand how and why other actors would want to achieve goals different from our own. The goal of this thesis is to present a new and simplified model for constructing security strategy. The new model enables a novel understanding of what “strategy” is and how it functions as a representation of the real world.

Within the context of broader policy efforts, the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) provides a baseline and reference point for U.S. engagement and policy decisions both at home and abroad. It is useful for policy-makers and analysts to understand precisely how the NSS understands the United States and the other actors it must engage with, namely other states, international institutions, and non-state actors. Rather than offer opinions on what particular effects a U.S. national security strategy should seek to achieve, this thesis addresses a more fundamental question: “What should constitute a framework for the formulation of national security strategy?”

B. RESEARCH OVERVIEW

(1) Method

This thesis comprises three distinct but integrated phases of research:

- Phase 1: An analysis of how the 2015 NSS portrays the United States and the other actors and threats with which the U.S. must interact; and, development of a set of requirements for an “ideal” strategy.
- Phase 2: A study of social theory and philosophy pertinent to the construction of a strategy that accurately models how we know and understand reality.
- Phase 3: Development of a synthetic model for formulating security strategy, followed by discussion of how such a model might be applied.

(2) Phase 1 – Analysis of the 2015 NSS

A strategy presents not only goals and objectives but also their underlying rationale. While a strategy may be a document, it also symbolically represents the logic and thinking of its creators. A study of the 2015 NSS reveals that it:

- Vaguely and inconsistently identifies the United States, its adversaries, and the threats faced by the U.S.
- Variously portrays the United States as a nation by itself, as a nation acting in concert with allies, as an imaginary of “American values,” in ways that are often in conflict throughout the NSS.
- Presents the U.S. and its allies aligned against other states, international institutions, and non-state actors, without clearly defining the relationships between them.

The 2015 NSS attempts to position the United States on the world stage. The NSS does not, however, provide a consistent logic to explain how the world works, and it provides only a rudimentary description of what constitutes “acceptable behavior” for other states. The NSS attempts to set limits on U.S. engagement in the world, but does not clearly define what those limits are; as a result, the goals and objectives of the NSS are presented in terms of cost-benefit. Also, the threats listed in the NSS are assumed to also be threats to the international system of states within which the U.S. seeks to maintain a relative advantage.

The world of the early 21st century is complex and dynamic. The 2015 NSS falls short because it is closely tied to an understanding of international relations that naïvely privileges the role of the state. It also suffers from a crippling oversimplification by positioning the United States in a direct, binary opposition to threats that prevents an accurate portrayal of the real world's true complexity. The NSS struggles to deal with issues like international terrorism because it does not provide a way to understand how the actions of an individual may directly affect the actions of a state.

An ideal National Security Strategy would engage this dynamic reality in a way that allows the strategy to be modeled, set into motion, and described in detail. The first requirement for an ideal strategy is an underlying framework of what the world consists of: an *ontology*. Second, an ideal strategy would provide some means for explaining and animating the actions and behavior of the states, non-state actors, and other entities in its world. And, third, an ideal strategy should facilitate nuanced analysis and description without being tied to the frames of specific theories, such as the schools of realism and institutionalism in international relations.

(3) Phase 2 – Articulation of Theory

The complexity of the real world implies that multiple observers (actors) each see the world differently. Accounting for such a plurality of beliefs allows a strategy to approach reality on a common footing with its adversaries, even though each perceives reality in different ways. Likewise, each observer holds its own biases and views how the world should function; conflict emerges when different systems of belief about how the world should be structured compete with each other. These conflicts may be understood as a byproduct of interference in the normative power structures that give agency to each actor. Rather than working to detail how various social power structures are different and unique, it is more productive to understand them in terms of what they have in common, which is an underlying network of power relations: an actor-network.

Using this approach, it is possible to construct a model in which actors make decisions based on seeking to maintain a relative advantage within their own power networks; and, therefore, that the decision-making ability of actors is limited by the

options they perceive within those networks. Actors will seek to maintain relative power within their actor-networks against the backdrop of all contemplated futures, ideals, beliefs and historical narratives, social relations, and physical and environmental tools and resources; thus, each actor is motivated to maintain strategic agency within its own perception of the underlying power network.

Theorizing a strategy as a representation of reality thus enables us to imagine an “actor” at the center of a strategy, which this thesis refers to as *Strategos*. Just like other actors (states, non-state actors, etc.) in a strategy, Strategos will seek to maintain strategic agency in the broader environment. This allows the question of strategy to be answered in an indirect way: by first articulating a nuanced understanding of the environment which the strategy seeks to engage, the field of possible actions of Strategos may be known. Equipped with this information, a strategist may then proceed to develop courses of action appropriate to desired goals and limitations.

(4) Phase 3 – The Synthetic Model of Strategy Formulation

The complex reality modeled in a strategy will be seen by Strategos as more or less complex; that is, more or less along the lines of reductionism or pluralism. A more complex model will more closely represent reality; in contrast, a more reductionist model will necessarily involve sacrifices in detail when speaking to the identity and motivations of other actors. In each case, though, the strategy is understood to be a reflection of reality: the level of complexity and detail are variable depending upon the needs of the strategy and the analyst constructing it.

A broad range of different concepts and ideas may be considered actors within the power network; these may include both human and non-human entities, such as individual people, nation-states, ideas, and cultural-religious narratives. In this model, each actor perceives other actors in terms of how they may be leveraged within the context of the perceiving actor’s particular power network. Moreover, each actor only perceives those other actors which it may usefully leverage to its own advantage.

C. DISCUSSION

A national security strategy presents a worldview; and, in many ways, it is a theoretical model of how the world “works.” In any theoretical model, consistency and integrity of themes and concepts throughout the model are imperative if the model is to be useful. As such, this project adapts existing ideas and models to speak in terms of the underlying power relations between actors, specifically those of thinking human actors within complex social systems.

The central task for a strategist is to understand how to interact with others and achieve desired outcomes. Likewise, a central problem of strategy emerges when one considers that both the strategist and the “other” with whom she interacts are intelligent agents. Imagining these actors as fundamentally distinct entities is convenient; but, this mode of thinking may inadvertently eliminate some strategic options. In contrast, a perspective that acknowledges the intricate relations between actors is especially useful when one considers that a national security strategy must provide a framework for engaging intelligent actors that perceive, interact with, and adapt to other actors.

The strategy formulation framework developed in this project relies upon a relational understanding of reality—that is, how distinct actors are fundamentally and intrinsically related to each other in strategically significant ways. Two key concepts are introduced to allow better analysis of the strategic world:

- The concept of *Strategos*, an active agent which engages with the strategic world in which it is situated while simultaneously defining, from its own perspective, what that world consists of and how it functions; and,
- The concept of *strategic agency*, which bounds and describes the possible field of action of an actor as a function of its power relationships with other actors.

As these two concepts have implications in analysis and the development of strategy, the following six maxims have been distilled to describe how the strategic agency framework may be best applied:

- (1) You only perceive what you can leverage. For all practical purposes, nothing else exists.

- (2) Everything you perceive in the world empowers you. Terms, concepts, narratives, and categories are important.
- (3) You are defined by what empowers you, by the things you can leverage and react against. You are defined as much by your fears as by your goals. Your perception of your place in the world defines how you will interpret novelty; change is fluid, not abrupt, and “new” things will always be interpreted in context of prior things.
- (4) Contraversion is important. It is impossible to define victory without defining defeat. Pay attention to both, and take care to articulate the important but often-unspoken things.
- (5) Hierarchies and categories are merely descriptive frames superimposed atop an underlying network. In every case, categories and groupings move the analysis toward reductionism and away from the zenith of complexity which most closely correlates with the likely behavior of the network in reality.
- (6) Things which empower multiple actors are likely to be contested. Special focus on an accurate and nuanced understanding of how identity and meaning of these contested actors is translated across the network is crucial. Don’t focus on dominating a narrative. Focus instead on how various interpretations of a narrative empower those who contest it.

The positions presented in this thesis provide a solid theoretical basis supporting the adage that “context is king.” Truth depends on each actor’s subjective interpretation of reality: perception is reality, and truth is a theory.¹ Multiple truths, however, are perceived in any given reality. It is crucial, then, to note that strategy, as an undertaking, differs in fundamental ways from the positivism of normative scientific inquiry: strategy should not be about making truth-claims about “how things are,” but, rather, about engaging a world of competing claims to that effect. Strategy is, in its very essence, a creative undertaking; what evidence *proves* to one observer must always be taken in context of what another observer *believes*, as each position is valid in its own way.

If a group, a government, or a nation state can be said to interact with its environment, then we must account for how each perceives its environment. Likewise, if an entity can be said to exist within an environment, then we must account for its integral

¹ Janos Boros, “Truth in Philosophy after Rorty and Dewey,” *Pragmatism Today* 3, no. 1 (2012): 169.

role as a constituent of that environment. Each actor in a strategy which perceives other actors (i.e., each *Strategos*) enjoys its own truths within a shared reality. The ability to separate these two related concepts is crucial for strategy development and analysis. On the one hand, everything within the strategic reality is part of a common matrix; on the other hand, each entity within that matrix can only know the world through the window of its own perceptions.

The underlying structure within the strategic environment is a relational network. Within that network, power is constitutive: anything an actor can discretely discern and interact with is something that the actor can leverage and which mutually (i.e., discursively) defines the identity of the perceiving actor. This relationship is, in essence, a relationship of power. The dexterity with which *Strategos* can creatively rearrange, articulate, and leverage other actors in relation to each other and to *Strategos* determines the possible field of purposeful action for *Strategos*: its strategic agency.

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You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.

— William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

It has been said that the gate and the pathway have no meaning once the destination is in sight. It would be better for us to say, rather, that they take on new meanings. My appreciation is due to many who have accompanied me along the journey to NPS. I owe perhaps the most to both my late father, Hoyt Gaddy, and to my mother, Barbara, for having always challenged me to take no truth for granted and for never suffering me to abandon hope. The love and continuous support of my wife, Laura, have likewise given me energy and impetus needed for the experience. To the rest of my family, friends, co-workers, colleagues, and employers, I say “thank you,” because without your sacrifices and encouragement along the way, the journey would have been treacherous, if not impossible. You have helped me to carry these and other burdens.

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I. INTRODUCTION

And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

— I Corinthians 2:13, ESV

A. THE PROBLEM OF STRATEGY

When Paul wrote his first epistle to the Corinthians, he was writing to a discordant congregation. The church at Corinth was dividing into factions and debates on doctrine were being conflated with different individuals and traditions. The meanings and observances of faith were contested. Paul wrote to remind the faithful that they were all of one tradition, that that tradition was not one of base humanity, and that they should not look to themselves or to other men for wisdom or salvation, but to God instead. He reminded the Corinthians that, while they may, in a manner of speaking, be considered “wise” in the “secret and hidden wisdom of God,” they held no claim to worldly wisdom. Spiritual matters being, by definition, not “of the world,” there were no grounds for worldly argument among themselves about spiritual matters.² Rather, his assertion was simple: one can only understand and speak of spiritual things from within the frame of reference of the Spirit itself. The paradox with which Paul wrestles in 1 Corinthians is that our observance and existence in the world surrounding us belies its true nature: things are not what they appear to be. Paul reminded the Corinthians that an understanding of the spiritual machinery animating the world was accessible only through the Spirit itself, and further that no worldly debate or authority regarding that machinery could be had.

Employment of the term “strategy” in the fields of national and homeland security is common today across a diverse set of domains; civil rights, intelligence, foreign policy, and defense are a few examples. The debates surrounding U.S. military and development actions abroad, coalescence of international coalitions to counter terrorism, and

² 1 Cor. 2:7, ESV

reorganizations of federal government in the homeland security and intelligence reforms post-9/11 are testament that, like Paul’s Corinthians, the contemporary American policy debate is discordant about why certain things occur, about what goals should be pursued, and about how those goals should be achieved. But, as Paul reminded the Corinthians, we must not become ensnared by attractive and yet empty debates about which assessment of events or promise of success most closely comports with the unique realities which each of us individually occupies. Instead of action-and-reaction—cause-and-effect—we must pursue a deeper, more fundamental, and, ultimately, more strategic understanding of our world. To speak of strategy is to speak of what is *really* going on: the hidden machinery that, once seen, cannot be unseen.

A bureaucracy generates its own vernacular.³ To understand it, one must be initiated to it. In security circles, jargon is employed almost as a commodity; and, in discussions of the United States’ future in the world, one term is preeminent: strategy. “Strategy” is a signifier with diverse, complex, and debated meaning—which is, in itself, striking, given the term’s widespread use. Depending on how the word is used, by whom, and to which audience, “strategy” may be taken to mean a policy, an approach, or a purpose. It can represent a political agenda, a communicative action to “others,” and a presentation of shared vision around which organizational efforts might coalesce. It may also embody social values, provide a means to frame a discourse, and facilitate the maneuvering of issues in the public policy decision space—all at the same time.

The national security imperative for a strategic understanding of the world is evident. The 2014 National Intelligence Strategy observes that non-state and transnational groups “can form, advocate, and achieve goals—for political, social, and economic change—all without central leadership,” and that “Identifying, understanding, and evaluating such movements will be both a continuing challenge and an opportunity for the IC [intelligence community].”⁴ Just as the IC works to “understand” and

³ Kimberley Christine Garwood, “Plain, but Not Simple: Plain Language Research with Readers, Writers, and Texts” (University of Waterloo, 2014), 32, <https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/handle/10012/8401>.

⁴ James Clapper, “The National Intelligence Strategy of the United States of America” (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2014), 5.

“evaluate” this landscape of “leaderless movement,” other elements of the United States government work to interact with that complex and complicated landscape through their efforts to combat terrorism, export democracy, manage economic development, and, more generally, to realize “opportunity” in the world for achieving goals articulated by U.S. leadership.

The fundamental question of strategy is how best to interact within a system of perceived realities to maximize desired outcomes while also accounting for the independent agency of other actors within that system. There is no single, overarching method of analysis or framework of theory that lends itself to the broad spectrum of geopolitical questions that are raised in an industrialized, resource-constrained, and globalized social environment experiencing terrorism. What then, exactly, is being fought against (and for) in the so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT)? Who are the interactants, and what are the goals being sought? Is it a war declared upon evil incarnate, against an idea, to eliminate a group, or to oppress a culture, or a campaign of freedom and self-preservation? A framework for the formulation of security strategy must necessarily be of utility for analysts working across various domains—especially international relations, security studies, and political science—while also being easily translated to policy-makers, military and intelligence operators, and laymen of the broadest possible range of political, religious, and ideological tendencies. The hidden machinery of strategy should be readily understood, not esoteric.

How the strategist tends to answer questions about contemporary conflicts and goals, like those set forth above, will vary according to how she conceptualizes the individual and his role in the world alongside organizations, states, and amorphous movements. More than merely categorical and descriptive knowledge of the world, it is her analytical ontology of the strategic environment—her understanding of its parts, how they are integrated, and how they interact—that will inform her answers. The use of the word “ontology” here is deliberate: it implies an underlying model—a universal lens—for understanding behavior. While caveats and special cases may, of course, be applied when needed, these are nonetheless built upon the same foundation—viewed through the same ultimate lens—of “how the world works.”

B. RESEARCH GOALS

This thesis explores current national security strategy and social theory in an attempt to approach a more strategic understanding of the world. It articulates a framework for developing strategy which may be broadly applicable within the security domain. It is an ontology of power: an abstract model for the behavior of man, that, when coupled with nuanced understanding of actors and their contexts, seeks to accommodate the divergent and conflicting goals and interests of nation-states, sub-state actors, and the individual which often complicate the generation of coherent analysis and the achievement of purposeful goals.

The social represents a complex system that behaves in sometimes unexpected ways. The best way for security strategists to mentally model that system—i.e., an underlying ontology for security strategy that accounts for the role of identity, actor choice, and agency across a continuum from the individual to the international—has thus far remained unclear. To begin addressing this gap, we must first determine how the United States, in strategy, understands the world it exists within. This requires engaging in a dialogue with the United States’ current strategy as well as identifying the gaps between what that strategy evidently understands and the other areas where its understanding of the world is less clear or, perhaps, patently void. As these gaps of understanding are identified, we may then turn to theory for insight on how best to flesh out our understanding of the world and more firmly establish a foundation for formulating strategy.

This thesis presents a new and simplified model to facilitate the analysis, development, and implementation of strategy in the security domain where an actor must interact with another actor or a system of actors toward some desired end. Specifically, the goal of this thesis is to derive and present a synthetic model—a derived framework with certain concepts and propositions—that animates the systematic interplay of power, behavior, and identity in strategy. Utilization of the synthetic framework will enable a fundamental redefinition of how strategy is understood and developed. Additionally, the synthetic model presented here may enable the development of more “resilient” strategy that better accounts for second-order effects; in other words, the goal is to present a

framework for strategy formulation that is useful, novel, and which may minimize “blow-back” and unanticipated consequences sometimes caused by ill-formulated strategy.

C. RESEARCH DESIGN

1. Research Question

In today’s complex security environment, offering critical perspectives on the content, stated aims, or actual outcomes of a particular strategy or set of strategies, and especially the retrospective analysis thereof, has become a diagnostic enterprise among both academicians and laymen. The question of practical improvement, however, remains in that the United States must continually adapt to changing circumstances in order to facilitate interaction with its environment and to achieve national ends. Conventional thinking conceptualizes movements, non-state actors, transnational groups, states, and multinational institutions in fundamentally different ways through the employment of multiple analytical paradigms, formal and informal. Colloquially, it is accurate to say that different tools are being used for the same (or, at least, closely related) jobs, to varying effect. Some of these analytical models may be mutually exclusive in their implications. Rectifying the apparent debilitation of strategy that results from such analytical incongruity would facilitate a more integrated formulation of strategy. Thus, this thesis asks, “What should constitute a framework for the formulation of national security strategy?”

2. Methodology

This study begins by engaging national security strategy as officially inscribed by the United States government. For this study, the National Security Strategy (NSS) submitted in February 2015 provides grounding for understanding how the United States formulates strategy in the nation’s current environment. The NSS, “together with decision-making, planning and execution, budgeting, and congressional oversight,”

comprises “a critical component of U.S. government thinking and practice in the arena of national security.”⁵

This thesis utilizes the constant comparative method to analyze and synthesize across several themes. The constant comparative method, frequently implemented within grounded theory, involves an ongoing, continuous coding of data and comparison among and between coded categories and sources.⁶ In this way, data are interrogated to generate thought about their meaning, interpretation, and structure as “the researcher continually sorts through the data collection, analyzes and codes the information, and reinforces theory generation through the process of theoretical sampling.”⁷ The goal of the constant comparative method is to generate theory. Categories are interrogated as to their nature, temporal and spatial occurrence, causality, interaction with the data, and consequences.⁸

This thesis is developed in three phases utilizing a running constant comparative analysis. Two phases of constant comparison are separated by a literature study phase. First, the purported features of the NSS are analyzed to develop a derived theory of an “ideal” strategy. Next, selected social theory is analyzed to answer the requirements of the theoretical “ideal” strategy. These inform the development of a synthetic framework that accommodates findings and propositions from the process as a whole. The result of this process is presented as a set of propositions about what strategy represents and how it may best be formulated. These propositions are then illuminated through discussions of hypothetical applications in the national security sphere.

⁵ Catherine Dale, “National Security Strategy: Mandates, Execution to Date, and Issues for Congress” (CRS Report R43174) (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2013), <http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA584684>.

⁶ Hennie Boeije, “A Purposeful Approach to the Constant Comparative Method in the Analysis of Qualitative Interviews,” *Quality and Quantity* 36, no. 4 (2002): 392.

⁷ Sharon M. Kolb, “Grounded Theory and the Constant Comparative Method: Valid Research Strategies for Educators,” *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies* 3, no. 1 (2012): 83.

⁸ Sheila M. Fram, “The Constant Comparative Analysis Method Outside of Grounded Theory.,” *Qualitative Report* 18 (2013): 5.

a. Phase 1

The overarching emphasis of this phase of research was to seek a determination of what purposes national security strategy in general, and the 2015 NSS specifically, purports to serve. The interrogation using the constant comparative method during this phase was driven by questions including:

- (1) What is strategy, generally?
- (2) How is strategy employed within the national security domain?
- (3) What is the context of the 2015 National Security Strategy?
- (4) What are the stated and observed limitations and challenges of the Strategy?
- (5) Who are the actors presented in the Strategy?
- (6) Is the Strategy internally consistent and coherent?
- (7) How are the actors presented in the Strategy positioned in juxtaposition to each other?
- (8) Does the Strategy provide a consistent model of causation and motivation throughout, or is it heterogeneous?

Exposition and analysis of the above are presented in Chapter II.

The constant comparative process was then continued toward the development of an ideal, abstract theory of national security strategy. The extent to which the 2015 National Security Strategy was found to be internally inconsistent and incoherent aided the formulation of an ideal theory of strategy through the introduction of negation: an ideal strategy would, necessarily, be neither self-negating nor self-contradictory. Thus, the scope of the comparatively-derived theory was broadened beyond the source material in order to determine more precisely what role a national security strategy should seek to fill. The interrogation using the constant comparative method during this phase was thus continued with questions including:

- (1) Why is the Strategy necessary?
- (2) What are the structural characteristics of the world engaged by the Strategy?
- (3) How do logic, knowledge, and geopolitics limit the Strategy?
- (4) What should an ideal national security strategy consist of?

An analysis based on the above line of questioning and the essential characteristics of an abstract, national security strategy are presented in Chapter III.

b. Phase 2

A literature study was conducted to identify and integrate social theory amenable to meeting the requirements—essential characteristics of an abstract strategy—put forth at the end of Phase 1. Selected theory provided the foundations and machinery necessary to animate the abstract ideal strategy. This process continued the analysis of what strategy purports to accomplish, actually accomplishes, and how it might be understood through various interpretations by an analyst. The dialectical literature study is presented in Chapter IV.

c. Phase 3

Based on the results of Phase 2, a synthetic model or framework for the formulation of national security strategy is proposed and set forth in Chapter V. This synthetic model was developed as the constant comparative analysis was resumed through the application of selected theory toward the original source case, i.e., through the lens of national security strategy in the abstract, but now equipped with the theoretical machinery espoused in Phase 2. The synthetic model represents a series of maxims for the analysis of a complex social system, developed through a study of contemporary national security strategy in the context of world affairs and informed through the application of selected social theory. A discussion and hypothetical applications of the synthetic model are presented in Chapter VI.

D. ASSUMPTIONS, PROPOSITIONS, AND LIMITS

This thesis proceeds from two key assumptions:

- (1) That the 2015 NSS is a legitimate representation and embodiment of the national security goals of the United States and how the United States understands itself and its place in the world, and that the Strategy is not intentionally contradictory, vague, or deceptive in its form or content; and,
- (2) That officially-promulgated security strategy has practical bearing on the decision-making of the human actors charged with and impacted by its implementation.

Likewise, a foundational assumption of this thesis is that security strategy can be improved through the application of insights from a broad range of social theory. The question of how feasible it may be to implement such improvement—especially in light of potential challenges in public policy, bureaucratic and legal frameworks and mandates, and added practical value versus potential costs or losses—is left aside for future discussion.

Most importantly, the synthetic framework proposed in this thesis has been derived exclusively from the study of strategy in the context of security studies. While this thesis is limited in that it engages but one of many national-level strategies, it is the hope of the author that this work will contribute to ongoing and future dialogues about how best to develop and improve the national security of the United States. The framework presented, insofar as it provides a method of accounting for motivations and behaviors of a wide range of actors, may also inform similar discussions about strategy in fields other than security studies.

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II. THE EVIDENT STRATEGY

The role of strategy is to set priorities among the almost endless list of tasks that might be taken up by the world's leading power.

— Ashton Carter, “Adapting U.S. Defence to Future Needs,”
Survival, January 1999

A. STRATEGY AS A PHENOMENON

The United States has broad engagement with the world. In the 21st century, engagement is complicated by factors like the spread of information technology and cyberspace, tackling poverty and disease at home and abroad, fighting international terrorism, and advocating for the rule of law and American values across the globe. To effectively align its resources and interests in these fights, the United States must employ strategy. Strategy, in its simplest formula, is about winning. Winning does not necessarily mean defeating an opponent. “What winning must entail,” in the words of McMaster, “is a rational determination to achieve a sustainable outcome, usually a political outcome, consistent with vital interests.”⁹ Winning, then, must be understood not in terms of absolute finality, but rather as a continuation of a current state of affairs, at least in part, into a future that is sustainable, acceptable, and tenable by the inhabitants of that future. “History’s great strategists,” Yarger says, succeeded at “combining art and science in an ability to perceive the realities, relationships, and possibilities of their environment, and integrating them successfully in formulating strategy.”¹⁰

Strategy is both “a theory and a way of acting.”¹¹ “To act” implies engagement and interaction with the world—either through trial-and-error (akin to fumbling in the dark), through routine and habitual processes (experience), or through purposeful, goal-

⁹ H.R. McMaster, “The Uncertainties of Strategy,” *Survival* 57, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 202, doi:10.1080/00396338.2015.1008323.

¹⁰ Harry Richard Yarger, *Strategy and the National Security Professional: Strategic Thinking and Strategy Formulation in the 21st Century* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008), 6.

¹¹ Julian Lider, “Towards a Modern Concept of Strategy,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 16, no. 4 (November 1, 1981): 233, doi:10.1177/001083678101600402.

oriented interactions. It is this latter type of interaction that may be described as “strategic.” In order to develop strategic action, a theory of what the world is, what its components are, and how they interact is required. Such a theory of the world is, in essence, an ontology: a comprehensive, systematic understanding of what “is.” Ontology likewise enables one to know when an explanation about or presentation of what “is” does not comport with reality. One’s ontology facilitates the division of reality from fantasy. When grounded in an accurate ontology, strategy enables maintenance of agency in the face of the unknown and the complex. Absent an accurate ontology, action regresses from the strategic to the rote, or, at worst, to the fated.

Theories of what strategy should be, how it should be constructed, and how extensive a role strategy fulfills in human society are numerous and dissonant. In the national security domain, one way of understanding strategy is as a tool which fills the role of “problem solver.” For instance, a review of the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review observes that the European region is characterized as a ““producer of security” rather than a consumer.”¹² In this context, security strategy may be understood as a plan for managing the distribution of a limited resource—security is quantized: created in some areas and lost in others. The problems solved in this regard are those of resource management: strategy enables the efficient management and deployment of military, economic, diplomatic, and intelligence forces and assets. Strategy, in this way, informs the “what” of the actions undertaken by United States: here a void is to be filled and some action taken, and there a void left empty and some other action left undone. Insofar as the actions of the United States also embody the potential of the nation—’what the United States is’—strategy determines what the nation structurally consists of and how it relates to the rest of the world on the strategic plane. The United States cannot be all things to all people: strategy determines which things the United States will be, and to whom.

¹² William J. Perry and John P. Abizaid, “Ensuring a Strong U.S. Defense for the Future: The National Defense Panel Review of the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review” (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2014), 24, <http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA604218>.

In order to understand the “why” of what the United States does—or “is” to its observers—strategy must be knowledgeable about the outside world in which it is expected to function. Providing decision-makers with the underlying logic for understanding happenings throughout the world’s regions is a cornerstone of the national intelligence mission space. The analysis and interpretation of intelligence is, however, notably subjective and limited—the United States is not omniscient. Ensuring that strategy is informed with an understanding of the world as free from bias as possible therefore implies a continuing need to “get more” intelligence.¹³ Thus, national security strategy must also solve the problems of detecting, understanding, and communicating information about the world within and among bureaucracies, leadership circles, international audiences, and various other publics.

These problems do not emerge in a vacuum; rather, they exist within the complex milieu of social and political life, with all the complications and opportunities associated therewith.¹⁴ Therefore, strategy is not merely a plan or goal—it is performative, it determines what the United States *may* know, and it embodies what the United States *does* know about the world.¹⁵ As the intelligence resources needed to understand the world are not limitless, the logic and understanding provided by the intelligence

¹³ Kevin Russell, “The Subjectivity of Intelligence Analysis and Implications for the U.S. National Security Strategy,” *SAIS Review* 24, no. 1 (2004): 160, doi:10.1353/sais.2004.0019.

¹⁴ Indeed, the socio-political milieu itself provides valuable material for analysts in security studies, whether studying macro-politics, bureaucratic decision-making, or individual leaders. See, for example, the discussion of foreign policy analysis models in Valerie M. Hudson and Christopher S. Vore, “Foreign Policy Analysis Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” *Mershon International Studies Review* 39, no. 2 (1995): 216, doi:10.2307/222751.

¹⁵ Annemarie Mol’s concept of *performance* as that act which reifies a particular reality in a multiplicity of realities is relevant here. Speaking of a medical specimen being examined by a variety of different tools, she says: “Instead of attributes or aspects, they are different versions of the object, versions that the tools help to enact. They are different and yet related objects. They are multiple forms of reality. Itself.” Similarly, Luiza Bialasiewicz reminds us that performativity is not derivative; it is constitutive: “Performative means that discourses constitute the objects of which they speak. For example, states are made possible by a wide range of discursive practices that include immigration policies, military deployments and strategies, cultural debates about normal social behaviour, political speeches and economic investments. The meanings, identities, social relations and political assemblages that are enacted in these performances combine the ideal and the material. They are either made or represented in the name of a particular state but that state does not pre-exist those performances.” Annemarie Mol, “Ontological Politics. A Word and Some Questions,” *The Sociological Review* 47, no. S1 (1999): 77; Luiza Bialasiewicz et al., “Performing Security: The Imaginative Geographies of Current U.S. Strategy,” *Political Geography* 26, no. 4 (May 2007): 406, doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2006.12.002.

community is necessarily incomplete. Strategy therefore also involves a cost-benefit calculation that wagers to most accurately understand the “why” of certain domains, regions, and efforts, while accepting that a relatively less complete understanding of other areas will be acceptable to leadership and to the nation.

B. STRATEGY AS A PRODUCT AND A PROCESS

Politics is a study in motion and change. It is important to acknowledge the very different implications of strategy as an inscription from those of strategy reified in action: “Strategy is what strategists *do*.”¹⁶ Strategy is action.¹⁷ More precisely, strategy is guided interaction among actors intended toward achieving desired effects. The interactions and effects contemplated can and do involve both human society and the broader natural world in which that society exists.

Unfortunately, many theoretical frames employed in the formulation of policy employ a static, process-based understanding of reality—a world of truth-claims and contested discourse. When animated, change is often depicted in the form of snapshots—stops and starts—which may be an artifact of our tendency to construct mental representations of imagined futures and alternate states without necessarily giving ample thought to the chains of events that would ensue should we begin to proceed toward such an imagined future.¹⁸ In reality, change is complex and fluid; complexity and fluidity are inherently difficult to capture in policy, but change is central to the discursive moves of politics. Political discourse is a closed system in which ideas, terms, and concepts are

¹⁶ Chris Carter, Stewart R. Clegg, and Martin Kornberger, *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Strategy* (SAGE, 2008), 7.

¹⁷ It is important to emphasize that “doing” strategy does not necessitate reducing “strategy as action” to “strategy as practice.” See, for instance: C. Carter, S. R. Clegg, and M. Kornberger, “So!apbox: Editorial Essays: Strategy as Practice?,” *Strategic Organization* 6, no. 1 (February 1, 2008): 83–99, doi:10.1177/1476127007087154.

¹⁸ Referring to President Bush’s 2002 National Security Strategy and its doctrine of preemption, Huehls says “Not only does this doctrine reduce temporality to presentness, but it also sacrifices lived experience on the altar of discursive speech acts. … Because the future is now, we must act as if now were that future.” See Mitchum Huehls, “Knowing What We Are Doing: Time, Form, and the Reading of Postmodernity,” *Cultural Critique* 61, no. 1 (2005): 57, doi:10.1353/cul.2005.0034.

inherently unfixed and debated in contrast—"There is no extra-discursive referent to which they are tied."¹⁹ Everything—both action and words—is discourse.

Our political behavior is habitually focused on a desired end state: a point on the horizon. The seas between us and that point, however, can be stormy. Theoretical constructs of a world in *stasis*, while affording the benefit of easily envisioning alternative futures, come at the expense of modeling the fluidity and motion of observed social behavior. Thus, it is important to recognize the distinction between *stasis* and *stability*. A world in *stasis* is imaginary. A *stable* world is coherent. Stability does not imply *stasis*—rather, it implies interconnectivity and wholeness.²⁰ A stable world may represent a dynamic and ever-changing system—but it is a coherent system nonetheless, where each part mutually constitutes other parts. It is the interconnectedness of the system that both bounds and enables its constituents to exist and to act. As the observer and the subject are always mutually constructed, the attainment of our goals in turn changes us. If, for example, we adopt a strategy that aims to fix the world to some particular or ideal future alternative, we must acknowledge that attainment of that alternative will also entail attainment of an alternative “us” as brought about by the new context or paradigm.

Once informed about forces to be employed and the domains in which those forces will operate, security strategy must, ultimately, solve a problem of action: how extensive and of what nature should engagement be? Along the continuum of engagement, two loci have recently been highlighted for the United States: in one, referred to as “deep engagement,” the United States strives to be omnipresent, proactively deploying its resources and so risking exposure, entanglement, and immobility.²¹ The other locus of interest is, essentially, retrenchment: a conscious non-engagement that actively seeks to watch from afar and pursue involvement abroad only after ample

¹⁹ Ty Solomon, “Time and Subjectivity in World Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2014): 674, doi:10.1111/isqu.12091.

²⁰ Stewart R. Clegg and Mark Haugaard, *The SAGE Handbook of Power* (SAGE, 2009), 132.

²¹ See the discussion by Friedman et al. in Campbell Craig et al., “Debating American Engagement: The Future of U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 38, no. 2 (October 2013): 183–92, doi:10.1162/ISEC_c_00140.

consideration of circumstances. Such characterizations change with, and are intricately linked to, policy. For illustration, consider that, in the late 1990s, four evident options for future U.S. security strategy were neo-isolationism, selective engagement, cooperative security, and primacy.²² In answering characterization, the problem to be solved by a security strategy is that of communicating the mode of rationalization through which decisions will be taken, and such generalizations are intended to mimic a strategy's underlying assumptions and aims—how the strategy operates and what it intends to accomplish.

Lastly, however, strategy must speak not only to operation and effects but also to its genesis: the value systems in which it is created and the actors that are entrained toward its employment. In this, strategy must solve the problem of “why:” first, to garner the broadest possible support among those who would implement it; and, second, to justify its own ontological viability. Strategy is future-oriented. As such, a security strategy, when portraying idealized futures, may freely expound desired values and ideals as a gloss or simplification without necessarily taking into account either the subjective perspectives and experiences of individuals or previous analogous occasions which conflict with the strategy's logic or assumptions.²³ Strategy is about the realization of a specific, alternative future. It is the concept of entrainment that most closely describes the process synchronizing and drawing-in participants in terms of shared worldview, alignment of incentives, and actual task-organization toward desired ends. Strategy represents a process that, if successful, yields real human behavior entrained toward the strategic purpose. On the one hand, myriad micro-scale relations together constitute a strategy's performative potential: a strategy is comprised of many actors and incentives. On the other hand, the cumulative potential and net effect of these entrained interests

²² Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, “Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 21, no. 3 (1996): 5–53.

²³ For instance, it has been noted that previous U.S. National Security Strategy has been hypocritical in its treatment of “nonnegotiable” universal values. See the discussion on “human dignity” in James Der Derian, “Decoding The National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” *Boundary 2* 30, no. 3 (2003): 21.

define a strategy's quality, persistence, and the achievement of the result that was sought from the outset: strategy as a product.

C. STRATEGY IN THE NATIONAL SECURITY DOMAIN

1. Requirement and Context of the U.S. National Security Strategy

As part of defense reforms of the late 1980s, the United States Congress mandated the creation of a report outlining a “national security strategy of the United States;” this report, which would become known as the National Security Strategy (NSS), was to be submitted annually along with the president’s budget request.²⁴ While the United States certainly articulated and engaged various strategies prior to this codified requirement, a number of factors made a tangible strategy, written and endorsed by the executive, seem appealing:

Few in the Congress at that time doubted that there existed a grand strategy. The nation had been following “containment” in one form or another for over 40 years. What they doubted, or disagreed with, was its *focus* in terms of values, interests and objectives; its *coherence* in terms of relating means to ends; its *integration* in terms of the elements of power; and its *time* horizon. In theory, at least to the reformers, a clearly written strategy would serve to inform the Congress better on the needs for resources to execute the strategy, thus facilitating the annual authorization and appropriation processes, particularly for the Department of Defense. [Emphasis in original]²⁵

The NSS is required to address several facets of U.S. national security and foreign policy; specifically, the Congressionally-mandated contents of the NSS include the following five concerns, which are spelled out in the law:²⁶

²⁴ The NSS requirement was included in the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. NSS’s have not necessarily been submitted on an annual basis. Additionally, while the law requires the submission of both classified and unclassified NSS documents, reportedly only unclassified versions have been submitted by recent administrations. See Dale, “National Security Strategy,” 3. See also Nathan J. Lucas, “The 2015 National Security Strategy: Authorities, Changes, Issues for Congress” (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, July 2, 2015), 6.

²⁵ Don M. Snider, “National Security Strategy: Documenting Strategic Vision. Final Report” (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1995), 2, <http://www.osti.gov/scitech/biblio/107902>.

²⁶ Taken from Lucas, “The 2015 National Security Strategy: Authorities, Changes, Issues for Congress,” 1.

- (1) The worldwide interests, goals, and objectives of the United States that are vital to the national security of the United States.
- (2) The foreign policy, worldwide commitments, and national defense capabilities of the United States necessary to deter aggression and to implement the national security strategy of the United States.
- (3) The proposed short-term and long-term uses of the political, economic, military, and other elements of the national power of the United States to protect or promote the interests and achieve the goals and objectives referred to in paragraph (1).
- (4) The adequacy of the capabilities of the United States to carry out the national security strategy of the United States, including an evaluation of the balance among the capabilities of all elements of the national power of the United States to support the implementation of the national security strategy.
- (5) Such other information as may be necessary to help inform Congress on matters relating to the national security strategy of the United States.

Each NSS represents the culmination of other ongoing strategic planning and visioning processes within the executive branch of government; the NSS also presents a keystone upon which these ancillary efforts may build future iterations. Two prominent examples are the department-wide, multi-year strategic planning efforts undertaken within the departments of Defense and State.²⁷ As somewhat of a synthesis of these larger and disparate processes, the NSS is a gestalt: the document is complex and imparts many meanings to many different readers.

The NSS speaks to diverse interests and to many audiences. Issued by the highest office in the United States government, it exists as part of a broader landscape of political dialogue and rhetoric. The inclusion of selected policy issues and the NSS's manner of articulating its expressed interests and concerns are each significant on their own merits. The topical repertoire and semantic construction of the NSS serve to signal the issues, political priorities, and concerns of a president's administration to the world.²⁸ It is

²⁷ For instance, the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) and Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) processes formulate strategic guidance that both informs and is informed by the NSS. See Lucas, "The 2015 National Security Strategy: Authorities, Changes, Issues for Congress."

²⁸ See, for instance, Snider, "National Security Strategy," 5.

significant to observe that the audiences of the NSS are both foreign and domestic, and include both private (lay citizenry) and public (bureaucratic) consumers. Signaling the importance of consumers, Don Snider and other officials who participated in several NSS development cycles in the late 1980s and early 1990s identify five principal ways in which the NSS serves as a vehicle for communicating worldview and strategy to diverse audiences:

- (1) Communicating to Congress in order to provide foundation for presidential policy decisions and budgetary requests;
- (2) Communicating to various foreign and domestic constituencies;
- (3) Communicating to specific domestic audiences, such as donors and special interests of significance to the administration;
- (4) Communicating to officials within the executive branch in order to align internal policies and build consensus; and,
- (5) Communicating general context in support of the president's overall agenda.²⁹

Importantly, the NSS is not necessarily “the only, or the principal, or even the most desirable means for the President to articulate publicly his strategic vision;” the NSS is only part of an overarching process through which the president and executive branch communicate policy and strategy on an ongoing basis, through various media, and in many fora.³⁰ Consequently, articulating an objective and accurate understanding of the NSS is problematic. The present analysis leaves aside considerations as to whether the NSS should endorse any particular flavor or formulation of public policy. Rather than focus on the subjective value or appropriateness of its content, this analysis examines the NSS’s thematic concepts and motifs. The intent is not to argue that the NSS is more or less accurate—or subjectively appropriate—than it should be. At issue, instead, is the structural, theoretical, and ontological integrity and coherence of the reality crafted by the 2015 National Security Strategy—in essence, the consistency, precision, and logical construction of its thematic concepts and motifs.

²⁹ Ibid., 5–6.

³⁰ Ibid., 4.

2. The 2015 National Security Strategy

a. *Setting the Stage*

President Obama's second NSS was submitted in the spring of 2015. This NSS has been characterized by its emphasis on an active leadership role for the United States, as it calls for "leading with strength," "leading by example," and "leading with a long-term perspective."³¹ This NSS was presented at a time when analysts and observers were debating the relative volatility of geopolitics; events in the year leading up to the release of the 2015 NSS—such as the rise of ISIL, the ongoing deterioration of the Syrian conflict, and behavior by Russia and China that was increasingly assertive regionally—were argued by some as signaling a fundamentally novel state of geopolitical affairs, while others argued that these events were merely more recent instantiations of older patterns and routines.³²

The 2015 NSS opens into "complex times" in a world with "no shortage of challenges."³³ In light of its ostensible purpose being to set forth clearly-defined goals and visions of their achievement, it is noteworthy that this NSS takes such pains to describe its world as one that is analytically intimidating. In this vein, a central theme of the NSS is the demarcation of various threat domains the United States must both enter into and dominate. These threat domains are not all geopolitical in a traditional sense, and they may be understood to include both causes and effects. For causes, the NSS looks to such varied issues as extreme poverty, violent extremism, weak states, and anthropogenic climate change. In effects, the NSS fixes conflict, economic downturn, and erosion of the rules based international order in which the system of states is understood to exist. While the direction of these causal relationships are clearly debatable, there is a striking juxtaposition of "Enduring National Interests" such as "universal values" and "security of

³¹ Lucas, "The 2015 National Security Strategy: Authorities, Changes, Issues for Congress," 2.

³² Thomas Wright, "Interpreting the National Security Strategy" (The Brookings Institution, February 6, 2015), <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2015/02/06-interpreting-the-national-security-strategy>.

³³ Barack Obama, "National Security Strategy" (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, February 1, 2015), 1, 2, https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf.

the United States ... [and its] allies and partners”—the same as set forth in the NSS’s 2010 predecessor—against the “top strategic risks” facing the United States: in short, an array of events such as overt hostile attack, loss of economic viability, and disintegration of the normative system of world order, any one or more of which could rob the United States of its agency.³⁴

In some ways, the 2015 NSS is unabashedly equivocal, employing language characterized by one commentator as “merciless governmentese,” making clear and neutral readings troublesome.³⁵ In its goals and objectives, the document has been criticized for its “relative inattention to prioritization or to the strategic logic of how to respond to the countermoves of our adversaries,” at a time when the Obama administration is argued to have bungled key events in foreign affairs, such as having failed to predict and prevent Russian aggression in Ukraine.³⁶ Nonetheless, any structural analysis must take the document on its own merits and grant three assertions: that the authors of the 2015 NSS did intend it to constitute an ostensible strategy for the United States as a nation engaged in global affairs; that the document speaks to certain definite interests and goals that the United States desires to pursue and fulfill; and, further, that the document’s narrative, themes, and content are not arbitrary but essential.

The United States of the 2015 NSS is not a nation defined by exogenous values or goals but instead is an actor defined by its means of interaction with a larger world. As such, the threat domains it contemplates are not those existential threats which might undercut the foundations of national power, such as a major domestic upheaval or breakdown of government. Rather, the myriad contingencies that might suddenly befall the United States are those which limit the field of engagement opportunities available to U.S. policy-makers and the time available in which such engagement might take place. Consider one example from the listed threats: “proliferation and/or use of weapons of

³⁴ Ibid., 2.

³⁵ Janine Davidson, “Obama’s Last National Security Strategy” (Foreign Affairs, August 21, 2015), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2015-03-02/obamas-last-national-security-strategy>.

³⁶ Peter Feaver, “Grading Obama’s National Security Strategy 2.0” (Foreign Policy, February 6, 2015), <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/06/grading-obamas-national-security-strategy-2-0>.

mass destruction [WMD].”³⁷ The message of this NSS is not merely that a WMD, such as an improvised nuclear device, might itself cause great harm and destruction; it is, more so, that the availability or utilization of WMD might suddenly change the calculus through which U.S. strategy is crafted. In essence, the threats listed in the NSS are not necessarily “bad” because they are *dangerous*, they are “bad” because they are *destabilizing*. In this sense, then, the United States of the NSS is especially sensitive to concerns that could threaten the logic through which it sees the world; i.e., when facing a threat, the NSS is constrained to some extent by the *status quo ante* “sunk costs” of U.S. diplomacy and engagement.

b. Identifying the Self and Others

The 2015 NSS presents “a diversified and balanced set of priorities” for “the world’s leading global power with interests in every part of an increasingly interconnected world.”³⁸ The central thematic concept of the 2015 NSS is, therefore, positioning the United States on the world stage. The first move taken in the NSS toward positioning the United States is the establishment of the nation-state as a “self.” The United States is presented as an actor that exists within and interacts with a larger world but which is also distinct from that larger world. But, the strategy is neither global nor balanced: the self and the rest of the world are innately different. The NSS positions the United States as if peering across a horizon or frontier beyond which lie the unknowns with which the United States must wrestle. Its first task, then, is to separate the “self” from “other” and to impart the rules and logics pertinent to each half of this dyad.

The United States of the NSS is a complex actor: a “self” with many faces. The NSS speaks throughout in the first person plural; in his letter of transmittal, Obama speaks of “our national security,” “our interests,” “our influence,” and “our history.”³⁹ The 2015 NSS uses the word “we” over 350 times, as depicted in Table 1; the “we” speaking in the NSS is often unclear. In some places, “we” refers to the people of the

³⁷ Obama, “National Security Strategy,” 2.

³⁸ Ibid., 5.

³⁹ Ibid., i.

United States, while in others it refers to the United States acting jointly with allies and partners, to the larger community of states, or to humanity in general. In fact, over 50% of the sentences in the NSS contain the word “we.” As a result, when discussing goals, relationships, and intentions, the narrative of the NSS continually shifts between multiple layers and faces of U.S. identity. The partners and potentials entrained in the NSS are not clearly defined.⁴⁰

Table 1. Word Count of Selected Identity Markers in the 2015 National Security Strategy

Word	No. of Occurrences in 2015 NSS
We	359
United States / U.S.	69
Partners	45
Allies	31
Us	14

In general, the NSS presents a United States identified as either a state proper (the United States of America) or as a state acting together with allies. The NSS also refers more generally to the American people, its military, and its citizens, in addition to other facets of U.S. identity. Taken together, these faces of the United States constitute the “us” of the NSS. The relative importance of these identity markers to the language of the NSS can be ascertained from Figure 1, which depicts the percentage of sentences in the

⁴⁰ The analysis of identity markers presented here is intended to be merely illustrative rather than comprehensive; the nouns and pronouns in Table 1 have been selected for their convenience to the present narrative. These words, however, are constitutive of discursive identity, as observed by Bauaman: “Identity is an emergent construction, the situated outcome of a rhetorical and interpretive process in which interactants make situationally motivated selections from socially constituted repertoires of identificational and affiliational resources and craft these semiotic resources into identity claims for presentation to others. This is clearly a productive line of inquiry.” Richard Bauman, “Language, Identity, Performance,” *Pragmatics* 10, no. 1 (2000): 1; also see Dorien Van De Mieroop, “An Integrated Approach of Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis in the Study of Identity in Speeches,” *Discourse & Society* 16, no. 1 (2005): 107–130.

document containing selected words and phrases used to convey the identity of the United States as an actor. For instance, when the NSS refers to the U.S. military, such as in “our military will remain ready,” it necessarily speaks to an entity separate and distinct from the other constituent parts of U.S. identity;⁴¹ likewise, the NSS speaks elsewhere of an “us” that evidently includes the military. The relevant observation here is that the NSS is unclear as to when it is speaking of the United States as a monolithic whole, as an amalgamation of interrelated components, or as a super-ordinate merger of U.S. identity along with that of its allies. There is an “us” that includes the military, an “us” that does not, and an “us” that includes states other than the U.S.

⁴¹ Obama, “National Security Strategy,” 4.

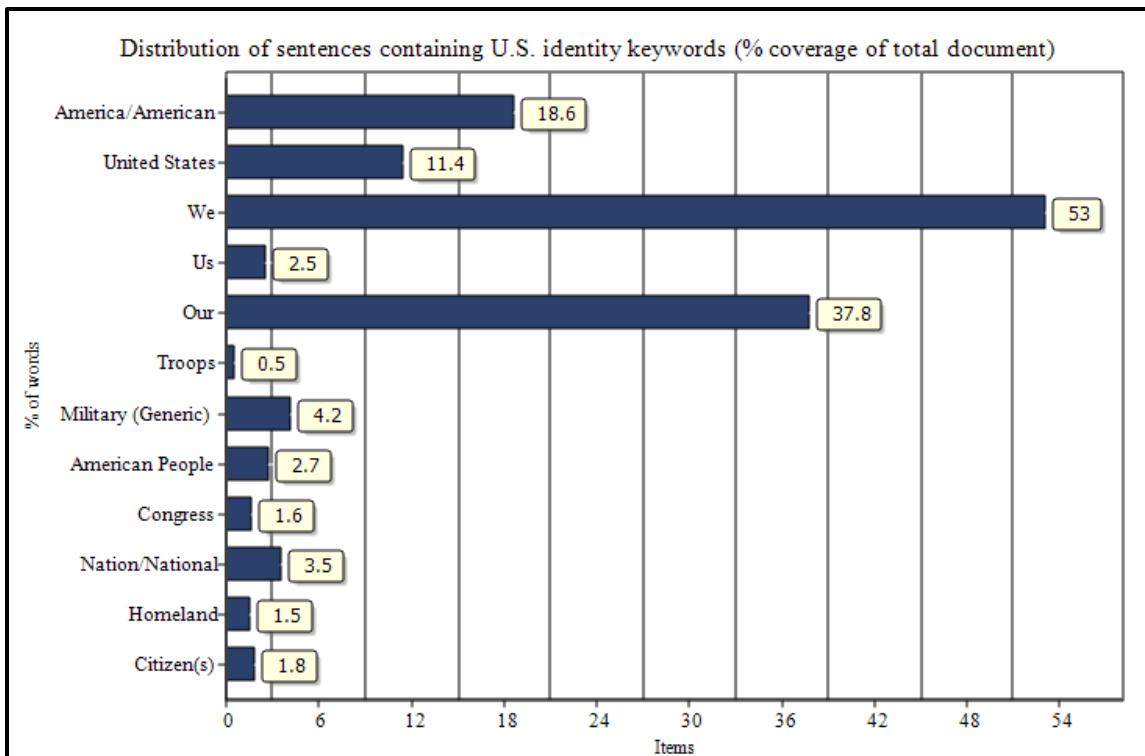


Figure 1. Sentence Coverage of Selected U.S. Identity Markers in the 2015 National Security Strategy

A second task in positioning the United States in the NSS concerns the establishment and identification of “others.” The “others” of the NSS stand in ontological opposition to the United States as an entity, though not necessarily in strategic or political opposition; the word *enemy* does not appear anywhere in the document, and the softer term *adversary* is used only sparingly.⁴² In addition to other states, the NSS refers to multi-national, regional, and inter-national institutions like the United Nations, the African Union, and the Association of Southeast Asian States. The NSS also places significance throughout on sub-state and non-state actors, such as terrorist groups and subnational political and demographic blocks. When referring to groups like the impoverished, the repressed, women, and youth, the NSS is understandably vague. These broad categories are also weakly articulated in terms of their relationships with other

⁴² *Adversary* occurs only six times in the 2015 NSS.

categories of actors; these disadvantaged exist, but the NSS does not fix their location in space and time—they are abstract yet significant anchors of the NSS’s narrative.

The general schema of the United States’ relationships with its allies and “others” is depicted in Figure 2, which shows the U.S. at the center—sometimes, closely identifying with allies, partner states, and coalitions—in juxtaposition with other states, international institutions, and non-state actors which reside in an outer, hazy reality of the larger world.

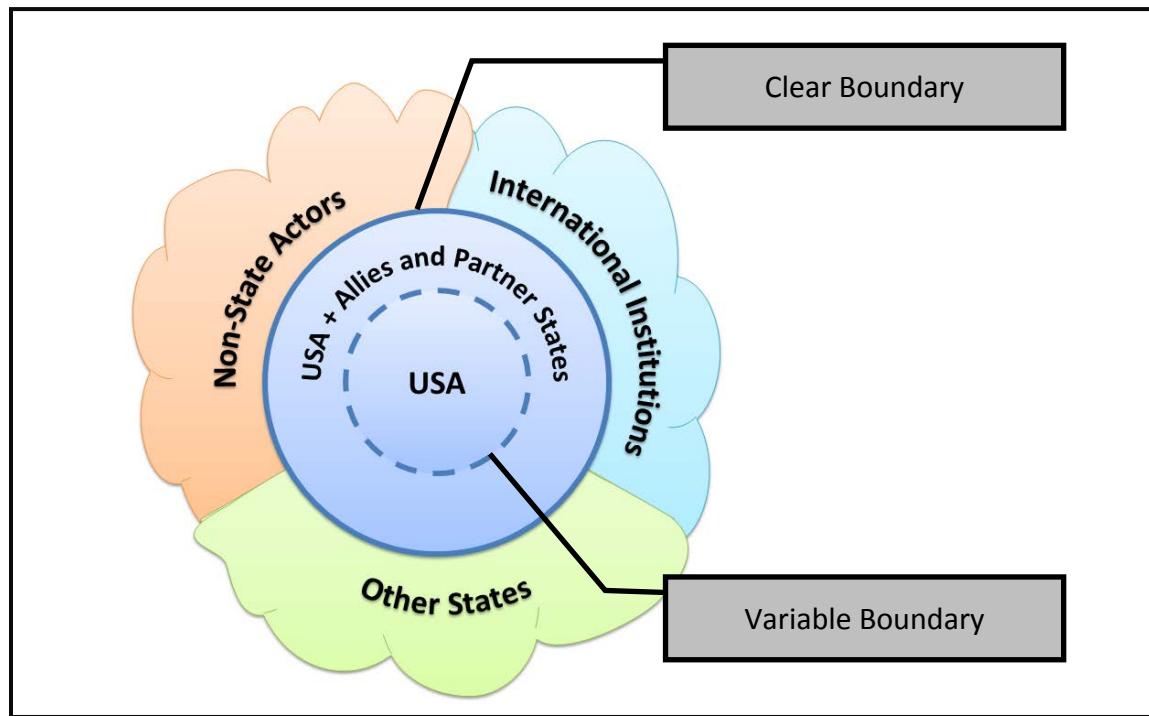


Figure 2. 2015 NSS Conceptualizations of Identity and Interaction with Others

Insofar as labels such as *adversaries* and *the poor* are understood to refer to specific actors, these imaginary labels also imply the existence of their opposites: in this example, *allies* and *the non-poor*, respectively. Consequently, in order to be considered holistic, the text of the NSS should somehow map these opposites back to their corollaries as identified elsewhere in the document. The NSS, however, does not provide this logical closure for its actor categories. For instance, the NSS calls for “reducing the

vulnerability of the poor” and advancing “the imperative of accountable, democratic governance” in its aim of ending extreme poverty.⁴³ Unaddressed are concerns such as how efforts to modify the socioeconomic status of the poor will also affect and accommodate the non-poor. In so-called “failed states,” conventional development aid is problematic as weak and corrupt governments often lack the capacity or will to implement aid programs in an effective and transparent manner; aid is often diverted to support the interests of those in power, rather than employed to the advantage of the poor who are, allegedly, in need.⁴⁴ Thus, to speak of engaging national ends to “end extreme poverty” is also to speak of accounting for engaging those actors who exist in dualism with the world’s poor.⁴⁵ The NSS does not clearly account for these other implied actors; in essence, the NSS speaks of some “others” in purely conceptual terms, leaving aside concerns of context: how, when, and where they exist in relation to the world’s other constituent actors.

c. Putting the World in Motion

Having established a playing field on which the United States exists in relation to the rest of the world, the NSS then moves to animate that world. The NSS does not, however, provide a unified model for “how the world works.” Rather, it seeks to describe the world as it operates in accordance with, or against, the proclaimed values of the United States. Foremost among these values is the definitive role played by the rule of

⁴³ Obama, “National Security Strategy,” 18.

⁴⁴ For instance, Mallaby’s discussion of the frustrations of aid initiatives is informative. Aid officials at the World Bank worked diligently to provide aid to Chad that would not be subject to graft by the country’s corrupt government. “Within six months, however, Chad’s government found a way of diverting \$4.5 million … to finance unauthorized arms purchases.” Sebastian Mallaby, “The Reluctant Imperialist: Terrorism, Failed States, and the Case for American Empire,” *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 2 (2002): 2–7; Also see United States Institute of Peace, “Governance, Corruption, and Conflict” (United States Institute of Peace, 2010), 5, <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/ETC-D/NPEC/480021.PDF>.

⁴⁵ As an example, how the introduction of development capital may interfere with the free will and independence of the so-called failed states; see Susanne Soederberg, “American Imperialism and New Forms of Disciplining the ‘Non-Integrating Gap,’ in *Neoliberalism in Crisis, Accumulation, and Rosa Luxemburg’s Legacy*, vol. 21, Research in Political Economy (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2004), 31–60, [http://www.emeraldinsight.com/10.1016/S0161-7230\(04\)21002-1](http://www.emeraldinsight.com/10.1016/S0161-7230(04)21002-1).

law in the international system of states: the world of the NSS is a world of *rules*.⁴⁶ Indeed, one of the four “enduring national interests” put forth by the NSS is “A rules-based international order advanced by U.S. leadership that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges.”⁴⁷

Consequently, a second thematic concept of the NSS is articulating an understanding of acceptable behavior within the context of the “long-standing norms of international behavior” to which the United States subscribes.⁴⁸ Actors who do not comply with these international norms are presented as “adversaries” and “transgressors.”⁴⁹ Significantly, the NSS makes a truth claim in its proposition of “universal values;” it is evident that the NSS’s assertion of the universality of these values is a performative argument for their universalization—if the values were *universal*, they would not need to be “champion[ed] around the world.”⁵⁰ Therefore, neither a desire to reify universal values nor resistance to universal values provides a sufficient explanation for articulating the motives and goals of the actors in the NSS. Motives for non-compliance are only loosely explored. For the broad concern of terrorism, causality is related to “underlying conditions … such as poverty, inequality, and repression”—terrorist ideologies are only addressed twice, as “dangerous” and “extremist” ideologies, respectively.⁵¹ State motives are essentially absent; Russian actions in the Ukraine are characterized simply as “aggression” from a “belligerent stance.”⁵² The NSS omits any substantive discussion of how these actors are motivated or of the ends they seek; signal words like “motive,” “reason,” and “factor” do not appear anywhere in the document. While it conceives a world of moving parts, the NSS lacks altogether an exposition of why the parts are in motion.

⁴⁶ And, it is a common criticism of American strategy that the U.S. seeks to remake the world in its own image, exporting its own interpretation of rules and values.

⁴⁷ Obama, “National Security Strategy,” 2.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 9, 23.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁵¹ Ibid., 7–9.

⁵² Ibid., 10.

d. Providing for Decision and Agency

A third thematic concept of the NSS is delimiting the extent of interaction on the part of the United States with the rest of the world. Essentially, this interaction is depicted as occurring whenever it suits the interests and needs of the United States. Throughout, the NSS provides many clues to what might be interpreted as “needs” and “interests;” several are directly pointed to as the “enduring national interests” of the United States:⁵³

- (1) The security of the United States, its citizens, and U.S. allies and partners;
- (2) A strong, innovative, and growing U.S. economy in an open international economic system that promotes opportunity and prosperity;
- (3) Respect for universal values at home and around the world; and
- (4) A rules-based international order advanced by U.S. leadership that promotes peace, security, and opportunity through stronger cooperation to meet global challenges.

Other interests are found intertwined throughout the NSS’s narrative. For instance, a primary interest of the United States of the NSS is avoiding hypocritical behavior by adhering to its own espoused values and standards of conduct. The NSS calls on the United States to “live our values at home while promoting universal values abroad.”⁵⁴ This assertion raises two lines of inquiry: what are “our” and “universal” values, and what role do they play in the world of the NSS? The “our” values of the NSS are broad and generic, but primarily refer to the rule of law and subordinate related concerns such as representative government, human rights, and rights to privacy and freedom of expression. The NSS’s “universal” values may succinctly be stated as a shared global responsibility to protect “our values” within the context of the rules-based international order. While nebulous and contested, these values and interests provide both the impetus for and the framework bounding activity and interaction in the worldview of the NSS.

⁵³ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 19.

Interactions are couched in language of risk versus opportunity. The concept for employing military force provides perhaps the best example of the NSS's employment of this formula, and its logic is generalizable to other means of interaction with the world not specifically articulated in the document:

We will be principled and selective in the use of force. The use of force should not be our first choice, but it will sometimes be the necessary choice. The United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our enduring interests demand it: when our people are threatened; when our livelihoods are at stake; and when the security of our allies is in danger. In these circumstances, we prefer to act with allies and partners. The threshold for military action is higher when our interests are not directly threatened. In such cases, we will seek to mobilize allies and partners to share the burden and achieve lasting outcomes. In all cases, the decision to use force must reflect a clear mandate and feasible objectives, and we must ensure our actions are effective, just, and consistent with the rule of law. It should be based on a serious appreciation for the risk to our mission, our global responsibilities, and the opportunity costs at home and abroad. Whenever and wherever we use force, we will do so in a way that reflects our values and strengthens our legitimacy.⁵⁵

In short, when facing any threat, the NSS seeks to engage the world when the benefits exceed the costs, and while giving preference to acting in concert with allies rather than acting alone.

e. Articulating the Threat

Any frame of oppositional interaction implies the existence of at least two distinct actors. The opposing forces in the NSS are not limited to discrete human actors like institutions, groups, or states; additionally, the actors presented in the NSS, aside from the multimodal “us,” are cast as either threatened or threatening. For instance, the NSS treats extensively several distinct threats to the international order, such as the proliferation of WMD. The United States of the NSS reifies the rules-based international order by acting through the rules-based processes of the international order to maintain the effability and integrity of that order. For instance, for the United States, adherence to WMD treaties and conventions gives them efficacy. When actors fail to adhere to such

⁵⁵ Ibid., 8.

arrangements, or when such arrangements are undermined or bypassed altogether, the international order and consequently the United States are threatened.

As such, a fourth thematic concept of the NSS is the identification of threats to the United States vis à vis the international order and the abstract humanity which constitutes it. The NSS accomplishes this task through the employment of a wide variety of oppositional pairing motifs, presented in Table 2, which frame the “us” of the NSS against opposing actors. While many of these pairings are not overtly defined, it is significant that the relevant actors also include non-human and quasi-human threats like climate change, economic downturn, and poverty. The NSS rarely explains *how* these opposing actors are threats other than in a general sense, but it explicitly identifies them as threats nonetheless.

Table 2. Threat Motifs of the 2015 National Security Strategy

Oppositional Pairing	Representative Examples
Us vs. Rising Powers	Russia, China
Us vs. Generic/Unknown Threat	Disputes, crises, and shocks
Us vs. Rule Breakers	Unspecified transgressors, alternative models, Russian violation of Ukrainian sovereignty
Us vs. Economic Threat	Poverty, global recession
Us vs. Terrorism/Crime	al-Qa'ida, ISIL, organized crime
Us vs. Weak/Failing States	Unspecified weak and failing states
Us vs. Nature	Natural disasters, climate change
Us vs. WMD/Technology	Weapons of mass destruction, cyber threats
Us vs. Uncooperative Powers	North Korea, Iran, Libya, Syria
Us vs. Ourselves	Competing priorities, over-reach

f. Synopsis

The NSS presented in 2015 endeavors to engage a troubled world. It attempts to locate and distinguish the United States among its peers, set expectations for how it and its peers should interact and the goals they should seek, define the boundaries and components of the world, and identify that which threatens the United States. It defines the United States in terms of a nation-state in a position of leadership in its environment. It portrays, however, a United States that does not necessarily know “who” it is; it is an entity with many faces: sometimes a people, sometimes a state, sometimes a web of organizations, and sometimes a coalition. By eroding the boundaries between the United States as a homeland and the United States as reified through its overseas endeavors, the NSS reveals such geographic distinctions to be artificial. The NSS refrains from identifying, clearly, any enemy or adversary toward which its strategy is oriented.

The world of the NSS is populated by nebulous “others,” in the form of nation-states, multi- and inter-national institutions, non-state actors, and imaginary categories of men. All of these actors are presented in interaction, but no rationale is exposed whereby their actions might be understood or predicted. In fact, the ontological foundation of action in the world of the NSS seems to be preservation of its own, internally-rationalized mode of interaction: universal values that primarily refer to maintenance of the rules-based international order among the system of states. This is a cracked foundation, however, as the NSS acknowledges the various threats to that international order, both in terms of the latter’s existential viability as well as the United States’ relative position of leadership within that order. The interests of the United States in the NSS are essentially related to maintenance of relative advantage on the world stage. Threats to those interests are framed in terms of “us” versus “threat,” where threat may be read to mean anything destabilizing to the United States’ perceived position within the international order—its ego and agency. These threats comprise behaviors in violation of espoused international standards, disruptions due to natural and socio-economic forces, and inability to achieve and maintain sufficient internal power and cohesion to interact with the world effectively.

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III. AN IDEAL STRATEGY

The apple tree never asks the beech how he shall grow; nor the lion, the horse, how he shall take his prey.

—William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

A. THE STRATEGY'S EXIGENCY

President Barack Obama's 2015 National Security Strategy is only one of several to have been presented to Congress since the requirement was established. While one might presume that the United States has always faced threats warranting the formulation of national-level strategy, the 2015 NSS is offered at a time when world affairs are widely characterized as tumultuous and especially challenging for policy-makers. Henry Kissinger, as quoted in a 2015 RAND report that advocates for a fundamental "strategic rethink" of American foreign policy, asserted to Congress that America "has not faced a more diverse and complex array of crises since the end of the Second World War."⁵⁶ Such an observation may be taken as part of a broader contemporary concern that formerly dominant modes of framing strategy and understanding how the world works—such as the neatly dichotomous domains of Cold War bipolarity—are somehow inadequate and, if relied upon in today's tumultuous environment, would leave America vulnerable to missed steps and misinformed execution in policy.

If there has indeed been a shift in the strategic environment, it is perhaps best characterized by an increasing complexity of national security as a concept. Where security strategy has traditionally relied on military and economic power to interface with other state actors, the focus of strategy today includes social and political issues. Where the goal of strategy in the past may have been military or economic dominance, modern goals are much less clearly articulated. Development and state-building, for instance, are less easily measured or defined than a strict military victory or clear economic

⁵⁶ James Dobbins et al., *Choices for America in a Turbulent World* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), v, 1, http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1114.html.

hegemony; this shift is made clear in the words of Michael Sullivan, commenting on the difficulty of measuring success when military victory is not the object being sought:

The rise and popularity of “small wars” in a more irregular environment, where the end game is *population control* rather than *control of territory*, has brought the military and political leader back together. No longer can the joint force commander simply ignore the other instruments of national power when security, stability, and peace do not equate to annihilation of an adversary’s forces [emphasis added].⁵⁷

As the end of the Cold War itself heralded uncertainty in world affairs, it also created opening for new frames and modes of thought. Two famous and oft-cited post-Cold War philosophies are those offered by Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington.⁵⁸ In 1994, Turkish analyst Ahmet Davutoğlu⁵⁹ answered these two particular paradigms—Fukuyama’s assertion of a foreseeable “end of history” and Huntington’s wrestling with the inevitable “clash of civilizations,” respectively—by arguing that “The end of bipolarity has created sensitive regions where there is *a vacuum of power needed to control the strategic capabilities of the geopolitical core* as well as the vast resource production trade capabilities of the international political economy [emphasis added].”⁶⁰ Here, “geopolitical core” refers to the world’s major powers, whose competing interests and campaigns play out on proxy fields across the globe.

In Davutoğlu’s worldview, it is dominance over this middle ground—what he terms the “sensitive regions”—that is the primary matter of contention among the world’s great powers. Such a perspective shifts the centrality of strategy from competing centers-of-mass to a strategy based on between-ness. Davutoğlu differs from Fukuyama and Huntington by taking up a third position in which it is not necessarily the internal strength or integrity of the great powers’ cores which is determinative in strategy, but

⁵⁷ Michael P. Sullivan, “How to Win and Know It: An Effects-Based Approach to Irregular Warfare” (Naval Postgraduate School, 2007), 63, <http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA476057>.

⁵⁸ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest* 16, no. 4 (1989): 3–18; Samuel R. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22–49.

⁵⁹ Davutoğlu would later rise to the office of Prime Minister of Turkey.

⁶⁰ Ahmet Davutoğlu, “The Clash of Interests: An Explanation of the World [Dis]order,” *Intellectual Discourse* 2, no. 2 (1994): 124.

rather great powers' ability to exercise control over the marginal interfaces through which they engage with the wider world; this is a framework of influence more so than one of coercion or supremacy. Davutoğlu's interface zones function as the gateways through which great powers—the geopolitical cores—interact with each other and the rest of the world. In essence, where conventional strategic frames present great powers as being engaged in a kind of tug-of-war with each other, this third view posits that the powers are tugging not on each other, but on a third, central object of contention between both anchors. Additionally, such an understanding presents a central proxy which, by its presence, enables the indirect interaction of opposing actors. In Davutoğlu's case, the “central object” over which he asserts that dominance is questioned is an interface zone: the Middle East and other “sensitive regions” which bound the former Soviet Union, such as Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe.

Interface zones have been a characteristic of intercultural and international relations throughout history; in many ways, an interface zone may be understood as a kind of frontier where the influences of competing cultures evolve and mix. Woolf relates the story of Cruptorix, a retired Roman soldier of the Frisian tribe living along the coast of the North Sea.⁶¹ After a failed military expedition in a time of civil turmoil, Cruptorix provided shelter to several hundred Roman soldiers who infamously committed mass suicide when they were later surrounded by the Frisii.⁶² Woolf uses the story of this foreign soldier to relate the importance of the “middle ground,” which were “places of creative hybridization,” in forming intercultural perceptions, such as those between the Germanic peoples and the Romans to their south:⁶³

Individuals like Cruptorix passed back and forward between societies, becoming to some extent bi-cultural as well as bi-lingual. Able to operate in worlds that seemed at first completely alien to each other, they became

⁶¹ Greg Woolf, “Cruptorix and His Kind. Talking Ethnicity on the Middle Ground,” in *Ethnic Constructs in Antiquity: The Role of Power and Tradition* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 207–217.

⁶² Norbert Hanel, Ángel Morillo Cerdán, and Esperanza Martín Hernández, *Limes XX: Estudios Sobre La Frontera Romana (Roman Frontier Studies)* (Editorial CSIC - CSIC Press, 2009), 836.

⁶³ Woolf, “Cruptorix and His Kind. Talking Ethnicity on the Middle Ground,” 209.

cultural mediators or brokers and participated in creating new accommodations and in finding new common meanings.⁶⁴

In the case of Rome, its frontier was ever expanding outward as the influence of the central core was consolidated over time. In the abstract, interfaces and frontiers between nations, societies, and cultures, however they may be framed, have always been important national security concepts. Today, however, all boundaries are permeable—both physical and virtual boundaries are increasingly traversed. War, famine, and economic stress have contributed to mass migration around the world. Globalization and information technology have rendered the traditional focus on physical contact across fixed borders practically moot—cyberspace is a world of its own, with its own frontiers that do not align to political or geographic boundaries. The overarching implication for strategy is that clearly-defined spatial concepts and categories may be interconnected and traversable in many different, but not always immediately evident, ways.

The observed modern world is more of a kaleidoscope than a puzzle: languages and ethnicities cross national borders, and international movements like Occupy and Anonymous take on life in the virtual environment of information that translates action into the physical world.⁶⁵ In this vein, the world may be seen not only as a hierarchy of tiered, privileged categories (i.e., multi-national blocks, states, and intra-state divisions) but also as an interconnected web—a network of networks. These networks exist in overlapping spatiality; for instance, the virtual network world of the internet and the physical network world of human society share some nodes in space and time—in some ways a pair of intertwined worlds while in other ways a set of distinct realities.⁶⁶ It is the interfaces between these networks that the NSS speaks to when discussing areas of conflict and contention over access and dominance in the modern world: the high seas, the internet, and, arguably, geographical interface zones like those identified by

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Of course, states also operate in the virtual world and, according to Ashraf, view it both with a “rigid territorial approach” for purposes of regulation and also as a borderless stage on which the state seeks to project power. See Cameran Hooshang Ashraf, “The Spatiality of Power in Internet Control and Cyberwar” (University of California Los Angeles, 2015), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/0w99g31p>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Davutoğlu. Likewise, the delineation of boundaries is not always black-and-white, as on a map, but is sometimes vague; a tendency for the United States to “integrate” with others has been noted in previous National Security Strategy formulations: “Simple binary oppositions are less useful to an understanding here than the process of incorporation and the policy of integration”—the United States actively seeks to recruit neutral “others” to its own quarter, to the exclusion of others.⁶⁷ It is through this medium, then—on the middle ground—that the United States of the NSS must translate its goals and interests into material gains across the frontier beyond which its perceived threats reside. To do so, the United States must understand on what ground it stands and where its frontiers lie across many different domains; and, strategy must *perform* these frontiers.

B. THE STRATEGY’S LIMITATION

Management of state-to-state relations and conflict is no longer the sole focus of national security strategy. The continuing interplay of sub-state, transnational, and state actors in terms of preventing overt terrorist attacks, managing cyber warfare, working to end poverty and eradicate disease, and “countering violent extremism” necessitate security strategy and policy that can deftly interact with a broad spectrum of actors that ranges from the individual to multinational institutions. There is no single received framework that facilitates an effects-based or feasibility-based analysis of strategy across this spectrum, but there is a rich field of theory available to analysts interested in formulating security policy and strategy that might inform such a framework.

As states control the world’s military forces, regulate travel across state borders, and regulate the conveyance of people, materiel, and information in the world generally, states, and their relationships, are certain to remain a key analytical frame for the foreseeable future. In this vein, international relations theory, which focuses on interactions among states, offers a variety of perspectives on geopolitical concerns. Schools of thought like realism in international relations explain state behavior as a function of a state’s relative position in the international anarchy. Other theories, like institutionalism, focus more on the interests of key actors. In general, though, most

⁶⁷ Bialasiewicz et al., “Performing Security,” 415, 417.

theories of international relations array weaker actors against stronger ones; weakness is associated with risk and opportunity, strength with stability and enduring influence. Insofar as the NSS equates weak, failing, and fragile states with threat and risk, a problem of theoretical integrity exists: weak states are not always dangerous. The utility of international relations theories that explain state behavior within a neatly-ordered typology of an international system of states is thus called into question; to speak of states is also to speak of emerging states, the remnants of former states, and whatever other groups or entities together compose these “hybrid” forms.⁶⁸ To answer these needs, a more scalable and fluid theory of states and their behavior is necessary.

Violent conflict has been a characteristic phenomenon of human social interaction for millennia, and it remains so today. The contemporary security environment requires strategy that can deal with both individual and group actors at the state and sub-state level. In many conflicts, terrorism emerges as a label applied to tactics of actors both weak and strong. As relationships among social groups—group versus group, group versus nation, nation versus nation, nation versus state, and state versus state—are routinized, the stability and rationality of conflict become, in themselves, motives and means for interaction. In this way, an actor’s understanding of a world in conflict can both enable and restrict decision-making by affording ontological security.⁶⁹ It is the so-called “terrorist” groups involved, however—not the state—that frequently become the focus of interest in terroristic conflicts. Social constructivism offers perspective on the many overlapping levels of society in play, both within groups of individuals and within the so-called society of states. As an international relations theory, constructivism does not privilege the state as something of a fundamentally different nature than a “mere” social group like a formal terrorist organization.

The NSS is, ultimately, a statist strategy that struggles to engage in a largely non-state world. As the NSS fails to deal with the question of self-identity in a way that

⁶⁸ Volker Boege et al., “On Hybrid Political Orders and Emerging States: State Formation in the Context of ‘fragility,’” 2008, 6, 10, <http://edoc.vifapol.de/opus/volltexte/2011/2595/>.

⁶⁹ Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma,” *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (September 1, 2006): 341–70, doi:10.1177/1354066106067346.

clearly articulates the state's relationship to the various non-state actors with which it must interact, the construction of the document precludes framing its reality on anything other than a foundation of conflict. Thus, resorting to alterity by defining the United States as that which stands against a wide array of threats, the strategy posited by the NSS and aimed at security is bound up with the discursive moves implicit in any conflict, which are succinctly summarized by Stern:

First, the subject of security (“we”) is imbued with a certain identity ... Second, this identity is constructed as stable and certain throughout time as self identical to the subject as it was “then”, as it is “now”, and as it will be into “the future”. Third, the subjects of security are inscribed as residing in a particular and demarcated space. Fourth, danger is named and threat identified. Spatial borders and boundaries both define this subject against the dangerous Other and protect it from the threats this Other poses. Fifth, cognitive borders and boundaries are established to distinguish an “us” from a “them”. These borders also prescribe codes that distinguish normalcy from deviance or betrayal, good from evil, Us from Them, etc. Sixth, despite the evocation of danger and threat, security discourses reassure us that order and safety are seemingly re-established – or at least promised – and are therefore immanent (the answer to security is in the past, embedded in the foundation, which is already known: how “we” were before). Seventh, security discourses set the stage for the enactment of certain security measures or strategies to ensure safety and survival as sovereign subjects in the face of dangerous Others.⁷⁰

Further, when dealing with alterity, it is important to note that the simple frames crafted in the NSS are necessarily dissonant with other, competing global strategic frames, as has been noted with previous National Security Strategy: “The spatialization of good and evil that results from these reinscribed binaries is in stark contrast to the imaginative geographies of other U.S. global discourses, especially that of the accelerating flows of globalization, which inevitably undermine such simplistic moral cartographies.”⁷¹

Nonetheless, in politics, the threat of conflict implies the undertaking of security. Maintenance of status quo is often a default goal of security, and political theorists have

⁷⁰ M. Stern, “‘We’ the Subject: The Power and Failure of (In)Security,” *Security Dialogue* 37, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 193–94, doi:10.1177/0967010606066171.

⁷¹ Bialasiewicz et al., “Performing Security,” 417.

historically wrestled with “the important role of normative systems integral to the social world in sustaining a political order.”⁷² The NSS clearly articulates a number of threats to its perceived political order, the rules-based international system of states. Among these threats, perhaps most salient is that of terrorism and violent extremism. Terrorism does not threaten the liberal society envisioned in the NSS only because it may end lives. It threatens because it may change how one lives in that society: it is an affront to the *rules* of the rules-based order. Where saving lives is a goal of a security program, it is worthwhile to pause and consider how analytical paradigms understand the term “human life” and what role individual humans play in those paradigms as individual perceptions of reality are actualized during conflict. Bosold and Hynek note that the word “human” is problematic, often invokes a concept of “person” as referent object of the state, and that, when speaking of so-called universal values, “the only legitimate form of governmentality able to secure humans is [assumed to be] the liberal state.”⁷³ Standing in direct opposition to such a governmentality are ISIS and al-Qa’ida: violent Salafi jihadist movements which reject the tenets of liberalism and embrace a form of Islamism that seeks to erase secular institutions.

Terrorism, as a social epiphenomenon occurring within a broader field of social interaction and conflict, remains a vigorously debated subject. As with almost any social action, terrorism may be analyzed from both the point-of-view of the terrorist and from that of the terrorized, with each point-of-view offering different insights for strategy and policy formulation. Whether characterized as a strategy, a tactic, or a statement on socio-political ideals, efforts to analyze and explain terrorism usually devolve into discussions of ethics, human rights, the order of the international system of states, tactics, value systems, and social and religious ideologies. Likewise, attempts to employ any particular rigorous analytical framework may result in analysis that is not readily consumable by

⁷² F. M. Moghaddam, “Commentary: Intersubjectivity, Interobjectivity, and the Embryonic Fallacy in Developmental Science,” *Culture & Psychology* 16, no. 4 (December 1, 2010): 466, doi:10.1177/1354067X10380160.

⁷³ David Bosold and Nikola Hynek, “Beyond Liberal Bio-Politics: Imagining a Post-Human Security Form of Individual Security” (Working paper, 2007), 10.

those unacquainted with the nuances of a particular theory or debate.⁷⁴ Regardless, the individual human perspective and potential seems to be an important factor in terrorism and one that is not readily addressed from the global vantage point of the NSS; the NSS speaks of terrorists as amorphous groups, yet leaves unaddressed how individual human motivations are to be accounted for.

Limitations such as these—that the “states” referred to in the NSS are not created equal, that the logic of the NSS is bound up in the discursive moves of securitization, and that even a concept as widely discussed as “terrorism” is impossible to define and grapple with from the strategic vantage point of the United States because of its innately individual implications—evidently have not precluded development of the strategy espoused in the NSS. They do, however, restrict the dexterity with which the NSS manipulates these concepts. In a fundamental way, the United States of the NSS is hampered by its inability to ascertain its own identity in a coherent fashion; thus, the ultimate limitation of the NSS is a schizophrenic entanglement with the “others” it creates in the actors—the allies, threats, and adversaries—that populate its world.

C. THE STRATEGY’S OPPORTUNITY

The NSS is a manifold of perspectives; it is not without bias and partiality in its categories and concepts. The NSS is unbalanced. Its identifications of actors (the “us-self” and “others”) are made with varying degrees of specificity; and, in some cases, the “others” evoked are almost ephemeral—an unknown danger that lurks over the horizon. The geopolitical and ideological horizons of the NSS are vague; while the NSS speaks of the change it seeks in the world, it neglects discussion of the intermediaries and “middle ground” it must engage in order to realize those horizons. No matter how one proceeds to deconstruct the NSS, a strong argument may be made that the remnants of the

⁷⁴ Consider, for instance, Ramsay’s analysis: “By carrying out violence that looks obviously unacceptable from the standpoint of a particular set of witnesses, and then going on to make discursive claims about why it was acceptable after all, two possibilities are opened up: either the terrorist’s claims are intrinsically and diabolically wrong (as opposed to the state’s, which are for all time intrinsically sensible and right), or all attempts to use language to justify violence must fail, and violence is instead self-justifying.” Gilbert Ramsay, “Why Terrorism Can, but Should Not Be Defined,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 8, no. 2 (May 4, 2015): 226, doi:10.1080/17539153.2014.988452.

disassembled strategy remain salient and significant if only by virtue of their having been included in the document. Rather than extending a debate as to what the NSS is or is not, or what it should be, let us pose a different question: what *could* it be?

The NSS presents a strategy for a nation-state, the United States. The United States is not monolithic or unitary: it exists as a body of diverse peoples, a state of laws operating within specific geographic territories, a collection of economic, social, and scientific potentials, and as an idea. At multiple levels, the United States has interests, goals and desires toward which it intends to proceed. The United States exists as but one actor within a much larger world, but the long shadow of its presence and influence falls across the globe. Frequently, the United States acts not alone, but as part of a larger body that includes also its allies and partners. But, the United States is opposed. Resistance and threat emerge in the world from several points of attack: from within, from virtual realities, from dangerous ideologies of “the others,” and from the changing nature of the international order in which it is reified as a nation-state; and, most importantly, the United States of the NSS evidently does not understand what drives the behavior of the other actors in its environment, as the NSS leaves aside any concrete discussion of what motivates these other actors or why they tend to pursue specific objectives.

An opportunity, then, for the NSS is to take up the challenge of explaining and describing its world. The NSS could begin by describing the world in terms of how constituent actors relate to each other instead of merely in terms of how they relate to the United States; this would enhance the strategy’s ability to deal with the identity of the actors in its world. Further, it could provide some logic of behavior for these actors by venturing, even if boldly or presumptively, to make claims about why these other actors do what they do; this could be done in terms of innate motivations without resorting to the explanatory capacity of the external stressors which the 2015 NSS relies upon and which paint actors as victims of their circumstances. Lastly, the NSS could be more scalable and consistent by not privileging any particular type of actor with special rules or capabilities. Such an NSS could deal with states, sub-state actors, and individuals as discrete points along a continuum of actor identity which behave in ways motivated by a

consistent logic and purpose, and none of which are privileged by virtue of their typology or association with or opposition to the subject “United States” of the strategy.

D. EMERGENCE OF AN IDEAL STRATEGY

If the NSS is to be the lion in William Blake’s analogy, it must look to others of its kind for guidance. A first step in that regard is to recognize that the NSS is, and has been, something other than what it could be. Second, a suitable analog for what the NSS should be must be found—or constructed. “Strategy,” Yarger says, “seeks a synergy and symmetry of objectives, concepts, and resources to increase the probability of policy success and the favorable consequences that follow from that success.”⁷⁵ Realizing “synergy” and “symmetry” in these areas, which the NSS evidently lacks, might represent a potential zenith of what the NSS *could* be, an “ideal.” The NSS should be able to account for the motivations of a wide range of actors using a consistent logic for their behavior that does not invoke exceptions for some and different rules for others. It should allow articulation of objectives and desires with logic other than the invocation of self-referential identity—the NSS should be able to explain why it seeks certain outcomes employing reasons other than, merely, a tautological assertion that “we want these things because this is who we are.” Based on the observations made thus far, it is possible to articulate a set of conceptual necessities that an “ideal” national security strategy might embody.

If the NSS is to reify a conceptual model of the world, then it must enjoy certain features of a sound conceptual model—namely, an ontological foundation and epistemological extensions. A suitable ontology must be derived with due consideration of how the world is experienced and engaged with by a perceiving observer inhabiting that world. “Creating [conceptual] models of reality for the purpose of understanding and communication,” note Guarino and Guizzardi, “should commit to a foundational theory that, albeit ontological, takes human language and cognition seriously.”⁷⁶ Further, we

⁷⁵ Yarger, *Strategy and the National Security Professional*, 4.

⁷⁶ Nicola Guarino and Giancarlo Guizzardi, “In the Defense of Ontological Foundations for Conceptual Modeling,” *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems* 18, no. 1 (2006): 9.

may read “language” here in the broadest semiotic-discursive sense. The conceptual model should provide for the existence of things to be modeled, the establishment of those things as discrete entities, and account for a superordinate and derived understanding of those things, the latter of these three also necessarily being a pluralistic understanding. These requirements are essentially analogous to Charles Peirce’s three semiotic categories of human understanding: “the idea that reality is comprised of three stuffs: lone quality, causal impacts between two things, and triadic relations (that have the power to beget more of themselves).”⁷⁷ In the first of these we have the abstract-theoretical establishment of substance—a one-dimension that Peirce called a “world.”⁷⁸ Secondly, we find interaction, an invisible (two-dimensional) relation between two monads with each acting on the other imperceptibly in a manner somewhat analogous to the “hidden machinery” alluded to by the Apostle Paul in *I Corinthians*. Thirdly, we find thinking, doing, and understanding—cognition and purposeful action in a three-dimensional⁷⁹ world—in the evident construction of a reality that is perceived by an observer who is also a constituent and participant of that reality.

If we take Peirce’s categories as a framework for stripping bare the fundamental nature of a conceived reality we may then postulate the requirements of an ideal strategy as a conceptual model of reality in terms of those categories. First, an ideal strategy must account for the substance its world: discernable actors with specific identities. Identities are variable depending upon observer perspective and may occur along a continuum of actors ranging from individuals to states and multi-national institutions. In the abstract, identity is a function of differentiating actors in an environment; further, there is no reason to presuppose that actors in that environment will be limited to humans or to

⁷⁷ Marc Champagne, “A Less Simplistic Metaphysics: Peirce’s Layered Theory of Meaning as a Layered Theory of Being,” *Sign Systems Studies* 43, no. 4 (December 31, 2015): 524.

⁷⁸ Joseph L. Esposito, “The Development of Peirce’s Categories,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 15, no. 1 (1979): 54.

⁷⁹ And, four-dimensional, if one assumes the temporal fourth dimension is an artifice or imaginary that exists within a three-dimensional reality, where, insofar as that three-dimensional reality is a conceptual model, actors within the model always exist in a static temporal snapshot and have no existence that spans across a finite continuum of time; for clarification, see the discussion regarding ANTi-history in Chapter V of this text.

human constructions, nor that those actors pre-exist their differentiation by an observer.⁸⁰ Concerns along these lines include: how individuals construct personal identity; social, group, and cultural identity; and, within the latter, organizational and institutional identity, such as with states and trans-national/inter-national entities. Atop groups of individual actors, the ideal strategy must allow for the perception of both hierarchies and networks and for translation between the two. It must also account for interaction with non-human actors, i.e., the natural world.

Second, an ideal strategy must provide a model of behavior. From the perspective of the voice speaking in the strategy, an understanding of behavior should be sufficiently predictive as to allow the achievement of aims, maximizing expected utility within the limits of its theoretical complexity and its ability to accurately model the reality envisioned by the strategy. This implies that an ideal model must offer a method for determining whether behavior has occurred—i.e., what qualifies as behavior—as well as an understanding of what motivates behavior.

Third, an ideal strategy must accommodate multiple levels of analysis and description. Building upon actor identity and behavior, an ideal strategy must also account for various and shifting levels of analysis in terms of actors, groups of actors, and the interfaces between them. Insofar as this entails assigning actors to arbitrary categories using conceptual labels, an ideal strategy should also facilitate rigorous definition of these categories. It must maintain consistency with the first and second requirements, above, when used for analytical purposes; identity and behavior should be understood uniformly across the environment, regardless of which actor is presented as an analysand.

In other words, an ideal strategy must present an understanding of a world of moving parts that are all connected to each other. The actors in that world must be readily identified, discriminated among, and animated, regardless of their arbitrary categorization. Such an ideal strategy should survey a landscape of men and nations and

⁸⁰ Here the term “observer” is used colloquially. For an interactant (actor b) discursively distinct from another actor (actor a), such distinction must reified to an external observer (actor c); it is not, however, the case that actor c would necessarily be a thinking, human observer—rather, the proposition is that, after Plotinus and Charles Pierce, for any two actors in a conceptual system of actors to be representationally distinct from each other, a third actor is implied.

be able to interact with and make predictions about itself and these “others” utilizing a single, consistent logic that holds within the particular strategic reality being contemplated. A summary of these requirements is presented in Table 3, Elements of an Ideal Strategy.

Table 3. Elements of an Ideal Strategy

Element	Criterion/Description
1	<p>Handling of Actor Identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Accounts for actor identity as understood from multiple perspectives simultaneously (self, others, group and social identity). - Accounts for interconnectedness of actors. - Accounts for shifting hierarchical and rank-ordered factors of actor identity subscription (self-categorization) without sacrificing focus on the analysis of interest.
2	<p>Model of Actor Behavior</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provides a framework for accurately predicting actor behavior given the limitations of available information. - Differentiates intentional behavior from non-behavior/passive reactions; stated differently, ascribes causation to causal agents both internal and external to actors.
3	<p>Actor Description</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Allows actors to be grouped/described using arbitrary categories without sacrificing precision; i.e., accounts for all possible combinations of actors in any given descriptive set. - Allows actor and groups of actors to be described with a level of detail chosen by the analyst; i.e., does not arbitrarily limit the analyst to any specific categories or sets.

The implications of such a formulation cannot be overstated. In such a model, both the strategy and the “others” it constructs must be motivated by a common mechanism. All corners of its reality must be accessible from a single vantage point. It must be, within the constraints of its own reality’s complexity, an accurate representation: cohesive, coherent, and logically structured according to a system of operative maxims.

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IV. ILLUMINATING STRATEGOS

If theory is helpful, it emerges from the oppressed.

— Gene Outka and John Reeder,
Prospects for a Common Morality

A. A VIABLE STRATEGY

Strategy, as Yarger describes it, “is a process that seeks to apply a degree of rationality and linearity to circumstances that may or may not be either. Strategy though complex accomplishes this by expressing its logic in rational, linear terms—simply identified as ends, ways, and means.”⁸¹ Yarger continues:

Understanding the nature of the strategic environment and a theory of strategy allows us to grasp and work with its complexity by understanding its logic. A theory of strategy provides: essential terminology and definitions; explanations of the underlying assumptions and premises; substantive propositions translated into testable hypotheses; and methods that can be used to test hypotheses and modify the theory as appropriate.⁸²

Strategy must maintain integrity in its categories and concepts; and, more directly, an observer or thinking “strategist” engaged in “understanding … the strategic environment” using a “theory of strategy” must be equipped with the complete and self-compatible toolset that Yarger proposes. In order for us to proceed, we must problematize this assertion and expose the foundations underlying this process. First, observe that strategy, in a sense, may be understood as an agent which perceives an environment; i.e., strategy may be anthropomorphized. Thus, strategy not only *represents* an assemblage of static features but also *reifies* a world in which the strategy and its implicit constructs exist. Second, insofar as strategy’s world exists and strategy perceives its world, that world must consist of discernable components; the world of strategy can exist only in the confines of an underlying ontology. Finally, for strategy to be anything other than merely an inanimate discourse—a history or fantasy, if you will—it must also *know* its world;

⁸¹ Yarger, *Strategy and the National Security Professional*, 5.

⁸² Ibid.

this knowledge, ultimately contextual, provides strategy with the epistemology needed to make sense of its world. Epistemology also provides for strategy's ability to overcome complexity in an animated world where perception is regulated and facilitated by an actively perceiving observer, a strategic agent: the *Strategos*.⁸³ Particulars may be interchanged and reconfigured through the mechanisms of epistemology that are anchored in an underlying, common and consistent ontology. As Heider observed regarding ethnographic studies, the implication of such a framework is that "there is a shared reality, true, but differing truths may indeed be said about it."⁸⁴ In this sense, ontology refers to whatever is consistent about a world (observer-independent) while epistemology refers to all that varies through the hermeneutics of specific observers operating within that world. Thus, we are in want of a framework that allows us to account not only for what the strategic reality *is*—its parts and constituents—but also for how both *Strategos* and the various other actors in that world see and understand *each other*. To answer this need, we may turn to social science and its literature, which provides us with the terminology, specificity, and integrity Yarger encourages us to seek.

It is important to note that there is an absence of literature conceptualizing strategy as an exercise in ontology.⁸⁵ There is, however, extensive literature regarding the epistemological implications of strategy.⁸⁶ Strategic thought, in a conventional sense, may be described as the ability to identify and exploit epistemological "gaps" between oneself and his opponents. This is a separate concern entirely from ontology, however: understanding and exploiting inconsistency in the meanings of things is a different

⁸³ The nominative *Strategos* is introduced here as a term of convenience for the subject—the perceiving, anthropomorphized strategy itself. Its etymology is apropos: a Greek word meaning a "general"—literally, the driver of that which is arrayed before it.

⁸⁴ Karl G. Heider, "The Rashomon Effect: When Ethnographers Disagree," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 90, no. 1 (March 1988): 74.

⁸⁵ In fact, in the business management and strategy literature, Thomas Powell has argued that strategy must be studied without a concern for ontology—i.e., as an inherently epistemological phenomenon. See Thomas C. Powell, "Strategy without Ontology," *Strategic Management Journal* 24, no. 3 (March 2003): 290, doi:10.1002/smj.284.

⁸⁶ See, for instance: Richard Maltz, "The Epistemology of Strategy," in *Unpublished Paper Presented at 20th Annual Strategy Conference, U.S. Army War College*, 2009, http://dnipogo.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/maltz_epistemology_of_strategy.pdf.

concern entirely from crafting more useful models for the representation of what things “are.” Therefore, we are presented with two inextricable points of inquiry:

- (1) How to construct an ontology within which the *Strategos* may exist in concert with a broader, conceptualized world; and,
- (2) How to equip the *Strategos* with the knowledge needed to interact with that world.

To meet these ontological and epistemological requirements, we must engage a broad literature through the lens of the certain concerns that differentiate “strategy” from other conceptual models of reality, specifically the features of an “ideal strategy” as presented in Chapter III.D, Emergence of an Ideal Strategy:

- (1) A robust model of identity that accounts for both networked and hierarchical organization of discrete actors;
- (2) A predictive and descriptive model of behavior; and,
- (3) Analytical integrity and translatability of identity and behavior implications across the full spectrum of possible actor categorizations.⁸⁷

Strategy is not philosophy. It is less concerned with truth than with utility. In purely pragmatistic terms, the NSS, for example, is an ineluctable reflection of the real world—it was written by real people for real purposes. While the NSS certainly deals with man and the state, these two do not constitute the whole continuum of actors that it imagines. States, in a sense, may be surpassed by multi-state coalitions and international institutions. The NSS also conceptualizes non-corporeal threats among its actors, some of which are “within” man—for instance, the ideologies of violent extremism, malign resistance and subversive alternatives to the international system of states, and so forth. All of these actors are entangled within a securitizing logic of opposition: the intent of strategy is not to *know* the world, but to *survive* it. Survival, in this sense, may be described as whatever ultimate goal toward which the strategic agent intends, regardless of whether the agent is cognizant of such a trajectory or end-state. The relationship

⁸⁷ Colloquially: The same rules about “how the world works” must apply to all of an ideal strategy’s actors in terms of identifying “who” or “what” they are, their decision-making processes, and their behavior.

between behavior and survival is central to strategy. Survival is an enterprise of interaction: resources are consumed and decisions calculated. To elucidate the three criteria of ideal strategy set forth, an investigation of how actors, such as those presented in the NSS, survive—how they behave—is needed.

B. APPROACHING A STRATEGIC REALITY

1. Order amidst Chaos

a. *Constructing the State of Man*

Why do states behave in particular ways? Three mainstream theories of international relations seek to answer this question and to explain its corollaries: structural realism, neoliberal institutionalism, and social constructivism. The differences in these theories are succinctly summed up by Hopf: “structural realism focuses on power relations, neoliberal institutionalism bases its analysis on constellations of interests, and constructivism emphasizes knowledge dynamics, communication, and identities.”⁸⁸ In essence, realism holds that states behave in particular ways because they *are* states and because they co-exist with each other in an environment of anarchy. Realism is a zero-sum theory of relative advantage. Realism imagines power as something derived from an imbalance between entities in opposition, each of which always seeks to maintain a superior position relative to its peers. On the other hand, institutionalism imagines the state as interested in absolute gains that are not necessarily obtained at the expense of other states.⁸⁹ Institutionalism has evolved from a theory which initially explained behavior as the mechanistic output of social systems and rules (the “institutions” which are the namesake of the theory) to one that accounts for the deterministic role of discourse—within and without a state—on state behavior.⁹⁰ Stated succinctly, discursive institutionalism holds that state behavior is driven by values and ideas in a constant state

⁸⁸ Ted Hopf, *Understandings of Russian Foreign Policy* (Penn State Press, 2010), 112.

⁸⁹ For instance, while a state’s continuing economic development and heightening prosperity may represent a goal and interest of that state, institutionalism would maintain that such a development need not necessarily arise only from that state’s exploitation of its peers.

⁹⁰ Vivien A. Schmidt, “Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2008): 303–26, doi:10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060606.135342.

of evolution and refinement. While these ideas and values are in constant flux, they nonetheless hold meaning only within the shared discourse, preventing a scenario of realist relativism.⁹¹ Institutionalism posits that states, as well as the international institutions and other multinational and regional geopolitical arrangements, engage in an ongoing dialogue through which goals are continually defined and coalitions are built.

Among international relations theories, social constructivism is noted for lacking a standardized conception of agency along the individual-group continuum—in this sense, constructivism has been said to lack an engine of power and politics to animate its predictions and to suffer from a “methodological flabbiness.”⁹² Constructivism provides useful explanations and analytical tools for examining the context about how and why events occur in retrospect, but it fails to provide a predictive methodology. Noting this discrepancy, some writers focus on augmenting the constructivist tool kit with ideas and analytical methods drawn from other traditional international relations schools of thought.⁹³ Whatever these “bolt-on” enhancements to constructivism may add in analytical utility is overshadowed by their reliance on often contrary theoretical lineages—a reliance that weakens the promising theoretical foundations of constructivism by attempting to patch or bridge areas of opportunity using reflectionist models rather than by seeking to extend the theoretical bases and milieux of constructivism itself. Essentially, constructivism speaks in a language of states as persons.⁹⁴ This line of argument proceeds from an assumption that, while states are clearly not persons, they are constructed of persons, and states may exhibit characteristics of persons such as behavior (i.e., discursive behavior), constructed reality, and identity. In such a model, identity and behavior are inextricably linked to each other: who or what

⁹¹ Ibid., 322.

⁹² Hopf, *Understandings of Russian Foreign Policy*, 5.

⁹³ See, for example N. Fiaz, “Constructivism Meets Critical Realism: Explaining Pakistan’s State Practice in the Aftermath of 9/11,” *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 2 (June 1, 2014): 491–515, doi:10.1177/1354066112466572.

⁹⁴ Charlotte Epstein, “Who Speaks? Discourse, the Subject and the Study of Identity in International Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 2 (June 1, 2011): 341, doi:10.1177/1354066109350055.

states *are* is, to a great degree, a function of what they *do*—how they interact with the word.⁹⁵

Drawing from social theory and organizational theory, Legro proposes a model for identity change that rests upon the introduction of what might be termed a “viable alternative” to a society’s current practices and beliefs.⁹⁶ In Legro’s model, identity change occurs when “expectations of related policy ideas are defied by events, negative consequences result, and some socially viable replacement idea exists and meets expectations.”⁹⁷ The model arises from the assumption that extant policies and practices in a society are dominant because they are expected to produce—or have historically produced—certain predictable results. Change may occur when these policy and practice expectations cease to reflect real-world events—i.e., when current practice fails to produce desirable results and the cost of continuing the present course outweighs the costs incurred by policy change. The concept of social viability is crucial, as any alternative to or replacement for current policy and practice must satisfy the foundational requirements and preferences of the current identity. Within any particular social frame, however defined, courses of actions or “alternatives” will be weighed for viability in context of the specific opportunities and limitations of that particular frame; i.e., it does not hold that, in any given situation, a viable solution for Group A is also necessarily a viable solution for Group B, absent other extenuating factors and qualifiers. While the analytical frames may be arbitrary, specified rules and conventions may nonetheless be held to apply within those frames.

In Legro’s model, some “negative consequences” to the status quo must exist in order for an alternative to that status quo to be adopted—that is, there must be a salient impetus for change that can be attributed to insufficiency of the status quo. These negative consequences must clearly outweigh (or, through political discourse, be successfully attributed to) the consequences of maintaining status quo. Thus, a state’s

⁹⁵ Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (March 1992): 391–425, doi:10.1017/S0020818300027764.

⁹⁶ J. W. Legro, “The Plasticity of Identity under Anarchy,” *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 1 (March 1, 2009): 37–65, doi:10.1177/1354066108100052.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 48.

identity is understood to be “plastic,” as policy paradigms only occasionally change despite being buffeted by continuous fluctuations in the environment. In this light, Legro’s model may be understood as a *tolerance model* rather than exclusively as a *change model*. One way of observing such a shift from a state of tolerance to one of change is in the ongoing discourse concerning problems, solutions, and politics in a society; in order for “viable alternatives” to take hold, some level of blame must be fixed on an identifiable agent responsible for the less-than-optimal prior state of affairs.⁹⁸

As political actors engage in discourse intended toward policy change, Subotić argues that they operate within—and construct—contextual narratives that are relevant to their constituencies and peers. Each state, like cultures and other identity groups, has identity insofar as there exists shared meaning about what the state “is” and where it came from—its founding narrative.⁹⁹ Founding narratives provide ontological security for a state’s citizens by providing a framework within which citizens understand themselves—that is, how they embody their identities—as citizens of the state.

Identity and meaning constrain the field of discourse for politicians, but also facilitate the creative manipulation of key themes to further political ends by helping a political actor convey information in a manner intended to garner support. When engaged in political discourse and rhetoric, a politician may employ a narrative “that emphasizes some parts of the story and conveniently forgets others.”¹⁰⁰ Insofar as politicians are, by definition, representative of a particular constituency, their narrative innovation is limited—they operate “within a dense normative social environment that constitutes their preferences and choices.”¹⁰¹ Within that environment, shared memories—shared narratives—of past political measures and their outcomes are constitutive of national identity and limit future policy options in that “national identity” must be preserved in order for policy options to be viable, thus limiting the field of possible courses of action.

⁹⁸ Deborah A. Stone, “Causal Stories and the Formation of Policy Agendas,” *Political Science Quarterly* 104, no. 2 (1989): 281, doi:10.2307/2151585.

⁹⁹ Jelena Subotić, “Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, January 1, 2015, doi:10.1111/fpa.12089.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

The implication of such an interpretation as presented here is that states represent a complex and ordered system. They are only an arbitrary level, or category, of what might be more precisely termed a “society.” States, just like any other social group, are constructed of men and all the socially-constructed baggage they bring along; states are not monolithic or privileged as political constructs. Interactions—changes in behavior—like the alteration of policy and perpetual iteration of political discourse are driven toward an expected utility, but are also limited by shared and contested understandings of identity. More so, they are limited by their fundament: the ordered construction of the society in which those interactions take place.

b. Assault from beyond the Pale

What might happen, then, when the behavior of a complex, ordered, and constructed society (such as, in this example, a state, but which may also be a tribe, an organization, or any other social group) becomes intolerable to man—in the abstract, to an actor existing wholly outside the self-constituting reality in which that society may be said to exist? More accurately, what label would be given to this kind of behavior—behavior that would be totally untenable within the limitations implicit in the society’s construct—something utterly in affront to the very notion of that constructed, ordered, complex society? Any reaction (or, simply, interaction) that is not completely antithetical to the ordered reality of that society would, of course, be considered normative *within* the ordered reality of that society. As a label for this other kind of behavior that comes from a place beyond the frontier of tenable rationality and logical resolvability, one word comes to mind: terrorism.¹⁰²

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, much academic focus was shifted to the study of terrorism, with much research focusing on terrorism as a problem to be solved.¹⁰³ In this context of exigency, de la Roche argues from a sociological

¹⁰² Terrorism is salient to the present analysis, but the choice here should not be taken to imply that there may not be other behaviors that are untenable within any given ordered and constructed society.

¹⁰³ This is what Brannan, Esler, and Strindberg termed the “hermeneutic of crisis management.” David W. Brannan, Philip F. Esler, and N. T. Anders Strindberg, “Talking to “Terrorists”: Towards an Independent Analytical Framework for the Study of Violent Substate Activism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 24, no. 1 (January 1, 2001): 3–24, doi:10.1080/10576100118602.

perspective that a theory of terrorism must hold five key features: “simplicity (economy of language); generality (applicability to the largest possible range of cases); testability (capable of being contradicted by observations); validity (conformity to the facts); and originality (unlike anything previously known).”¹⁰⁴ This last proposition is interesting insofar as it may indicate the emergence of what has been termed “the new terrorism” of the modern epoch. It may be argued, however, that the “essentially modern” features often ascribed to terrorism are “inessential features” to a rigorous discussion of the epiphenomenon.¹⁰⁵

Cameron and Goldstein point out that specific concerns such as globalization and religious ideology are symptomatic, but not diagnostic, of modern terrorism’s phenomenology—that is, terrorism is not simply “about globalization” nor “about ideology.” These authors, however, do tend toward a description of terrorism that evokes a progressive pathway of cognitive dissonance, social revolutionary intent, violence, and, ultimately, death—a view which privileges terrorism as a phenomenon rooted in modernity: a decidedly structuralist (i.e., modern) approach. In a more specific application of a similar, but methodologically distinct, argument, the concept of a “new terrorism” in the context of a post-September 11, 2001 environment has been discredited.¹⁰⁶

Generally speaking, schools of terrorism studies focus on either of two concerns: what terrorism *means* (sociology, psychology, and political science) or what terrorism *does* (strategies and tactics). The camps of this dichotomy may be condensed thematically: social/psychological studies are devoted to understanding and explaining why terrorism and its related phenomena occur; and, realist/pragmatist approaches to the phenomenology of terror take its causality *de facto* and focus instead on studying ways to

¹⁰⁴ Roberta Senechal dela Roche, “Toward a Scientific Theory of Terrorism,” *Sociological Theory* 22, no. 1 (March 1, 2004): 1–4, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9558.2004.00199.x.

¹⁰⁵ Gavin Cameron and Joshua David Goldstein, “The Ontology of Modern Terrorism: Hegel, Terrorism Studies and Dynamics of Violence,” *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2010): 60.

¹⁰⁶ Michael Stohl, “Don’t Confuse Me with the Facts: Knowledge Claims and Terrorism,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5, no. 1 (April 2012): 34, doi:10.1080/17539153.2012.659908.

identify, control, or manage it. The received theories of terrorism provide approaches of psychology and psychopathy, social identity theory/social categorization theory, social conflict theory, collective violence, and communications theory, among other approaches.

Among the issues on which the received theories have historically offered different opinions and debate are the following:

- (1) *Whether terrorism is essentially a group phenomenon.* For example, can an individual acting alone be considered a terrorist? To what extent are “parent cultures” to be held responsible when their members perpetrate acts of terrorism? Does ideology or culture generate terrorism or might terrorism arise within any given ideology or culture?
- (2) *Whether the essence of terrorism lies in the act itself, or in the communicative activity/effect of the act.* Is a targeted assassination an act of terrorism? Is the purpose of terrorism to kill and degrade the enemy or to coerce and intimidate an audience?
- (3) *Whether asymmetry of capability between terrorist and target is a defining feature.* Does a fight between terrorist groups represent terrorism?
- (4) *Whether terrorism can be perpetrated by a government/nation-state.* What is the difference between terrorism and war? How do ethical and legal frameworks sometimes justify war but not terrorism?
- (5) *Whether the cause of terrorism lies in the individual or in the social.* What are the root causes of terrorism? Are terrorists mentally ill? Can social engineering be used to “counter violent extremism?” Can terrorists be systematically “de-radicalized” and reintegrated into society?

An example of this uncertainty may be found in Crenshaw’s analysis of two competing viewpoints: instrumentalism versus organizational theory.¹⁰⁷ In the instrumental approach, terrorism is seen as a means to an eventual end. Terrorism is about violence and conflict in an attempt to influence or overcome an adversary: a central future goal is posited for the terrorist endeavor and the apparatus of terrorism deployed to achieve realization of that goal. As goals may be very difficult to obtain, various strategies might be employed to bring about attainment of the goal in a series of

¹⁰⁷ Martha Crenshaw, “Theories of Terrorism: Instrumental and Organizational Approaches,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 10, no. 4 (December 1, 1987): 13–31, doi:10.1080/01402398708437313.

escalating strategic choices. In contrast, organizational theory posits that terrorism is a phenomenon in-and-of itself. The goal of terrorists in this mode of theory is to perpetuate their organizations and to elevate their own status within those organizations. Such a view posits that terrorist organizations will take measures to retain and recruit members such as preventing group member exit and taking extreme measures to ensure loyalty to the group. Along the lines of these concerns, Crenshaw notes, terrorist organizations based around ideology might find common ground with the phenomenon of a cult. In her words, “the motivation for terrorism may be to transcend reality as much as to transform it.”¹⁰⁸

From an emic perspective, terrorism has been described as a meaning-making activity that gives “terrorists a sense of meaning or purpose in life.”¹⁰⁹ From the etic perspective, terrorism is described as “a decentralized, complex, [and] evolutionary process,” that does not lend itself to being countered through conventional (kinetic) military means alone.¹¹⁰ This should not imply that so-called “terrorists” are any more or less vulnerable to death—kinetic intervention—than any other humans; rather, it serves to remind us that—at least, in Western, liberal societies—many restrictions operate to limit the range of possible courses-of-action available for dealing with terrorists and their organizations, and such options range from ignoring it altogether, to military intervention, and onward to complex social and political interventions such as “countering violent extremism” and “exporting democracy.”

Terrorism is a phenomenon of human interaction with—and within—political orders. As such, analysts and strategists are necessarily limited in their engagement with terrorism by utilizing existing theoretical frames to discuss the phenomenon. Theoretical frames are co-opted by institutions and political actors to varying effect. For instance, terrorism, to the military, may be viewed primarily as a tactic to be thwarted, and so be

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰⁹ Jonathan Matusitz, *Symbolism in Terrorism: Motivation, Communication, and Behavior* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 6.

¹¹⁰ Daniel P. Aldrich, “Mightier than the Sword: Social Science and Development in Countering Violent Extremism,” *Frontiers in Development*, 2012, 48, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2028009.

dealt with using frameworks of counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency military operations. For social theorists, terrorism embodies a deviation from normative social interaction, and thus may be dealt with in terms of an actor's rebellion against a dominant or threatening social order. For analysts writing in advocacy of citizens' points-of-view, terrorism may be understood as a securitized issue exploited by government actors to dominate and control populations both domestically and abroad.¹¹¹ As terrorism is relevant to everyone, everyone appears entitled to an opinion about what terrorism means and how it should best be controlled—or employed.

Critical theory and phenomenology may hold promise for analysts in this regard. In these constructs, the adage “perception is reality” is held as axiomatic. All experience is understood to be discursive. Human actors construct their realities through differentiation—instantiation—of other actors against themselves and so construct a milieu of perceived actors.¹¹² What people *want* is a function of what people perceive they *could be*. This should not be understood in a literal sense of what is possible in the perceived reality of the external world—rather, the construction holds for both *real* experience of the actor that remains temporally tuned to the (psychological) present of the external world environment as well as for *imagined* environments not necessarily tuned to experiential reality. All realized and cognized human activity takes place within the bounds of a discursively perceived reality. The environment perceived by a human includes other actors: the natural world, animals, plants, and other humans. As a person observes other humans interacting with this (his) environment, meanings are learned

¹¹¹ For a treatise expounding such a viewpoint, see Christos Boukalas, *Homeland Security, Its Law and Its State: A Design of Power for the 21st Century* (Routledge, 2014).

¹¹² Discourse is not about reductionism—it is about ingesting reality, and “discourse” is not limited to literal texts or “messages.” “This means that while nothing exists outside of discourse, there are important distinctions between linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena. There are also modes of representation which are ideational though strictly non-linguistic, such as the aesthetic and pictorial. It is just that there is no way of comprehending non-linguistic and extradiscursive phenomena except through discursive practices.” Bialasiewicz et al., “Performing Security,” 46.

derivatively, through observation and example in interpretation of observation; in this sense, perception of reality is said to be socially constructed.¹¹³

Take, for instance, Morris and Crank's suggestion of various means through which phenomenology might be useful to terrorism studies, which centers on two premises: first, that terrorism tends to be defined in terms of organizational *raisons d'être*—i.e., organizations (bureaucratic, nation-states, groups of individuals) may be described as “related” or “not related” to terrorism, thus necessitating actors (individual or otherwise) to define their identities in relation to “terrorism;” and, second, that the phenomena of terrorism and counter-terrorism inevitably invoke securitizing discourse which tends to limit analytical objectivity.¹¹⁴ Another example is found in Teschner who argues that terrorism represents a case of alterity conflict between mutually irreconcilable “singularities”—such as a state and the terrorists it combats.¹¹⁵

In addressing the ethics of terrorism, Smith uses phenomenological frames, first observing that terrorism may be understood as a “transgressive spectacle,” or, in other words, a violation of the normative principles of violent conflict.¹¹⁶ He also posits the role of ideology in the form of what he calls “existential values,” noting that terrorism is not merely a rejection of norms, but also an expression of “positive commitment to a certain set of values”—in other words, terrorism is a speech act.¹¹⁷ Smith's observation that “the phenomenology of terrorism is the fear of moral annihilation” is perhaps most salient in that his concept of terrorist conflict in this regard may also be understood as a

¹¹³ The concept of social constructionism invoked is that formulated by Berger and Luckman (1967). Consider the exegesis of human experience in Foucault (2002), pp. 341–342. While Foucault's assertion of the certain “finitude” of humanity is clearly debatable on theological grounds, his analysis is at least representative of temporal experience. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor, 1967).

¹¹⁴ Travis Morris and John P. Crank, “Toward a Phenomenology of Terrorism: Implications for Research and Policy,” *Crime, Law and Social Change* 56, no. 3 (October 2011): 219–42, doi:10.1007/s10611-011-9310-9.

¹¹⁵ George Teschner and The Society for Philosophy in the Contemporary World, “Terrorism, Singularity, and the Phenomenology of Understanding;” ed. Andrew Fiala, *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 15, no. 1 (2008): 32–43, doi:10.5840/pcw20081514.

¹¹⁶ Matthew Noah Smith, “Terrorism as Ethical Singularity,” *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 2010, 229–245.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 237.

conflict of competing modes of governmentality. Further, in discussion of what he terms the “ethical singularity,” Smith points out that the terrorist’s moral judgment is not necessarily *wrong* but that it is instead utterly incompatible with the systems of moral judgement of those who would find fault with it—in this sense, ethical conflict is irreconcilable insofar as the terrorist’s ethical hermeneutic is purely subjective.

2. An Identity Crisis

a. *A Face in the Mirror*

Smith’s argument that phenomenological frames matter may lend itself to employment as an adjunct to social psychological theories of terrorism in its recognition of the important role of actor messaging to in-group peers. A question remains, though, as to whether terrorist conflict may be explained without necessitating the use of generic devices such as irreconcilability and closed systems of morality and ethics. Smith argues that in terroristic conflicts, the parties “both see the other as committed to ethical singularities, and so both will likely see the violence committed by the other as terroristic.”¹¹⁸ This assertion unnecessarily reduces the problem space in its presumption that the “root of conflict” (the mutual incompatibility of competing ethical singularities) would be *mutually* construed.¹¹⁹

Within the bounds of perceived reality, politics exists as a categorical subset of the whole spectrum of human activity. Normative political systems function as frameworks that govern the deployment and operation of power within particular social constructs. The existence and function of such normative systems is embodied in the Foucauldian concept of *governmentality*. Governmentality refers to the employment of what may be termed “political technologies” within a particular socio-cultural context to a desired end—that is to say the regulatory action of the various mechanisms through which power is exercised in a particular social context.¹²⁰ While many understand

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 243.

¹¹⁹ Smith’s description is structured exclusively upon the operation of fear, which is but one of the modes in which power may be seen to operate.

¹²⁰ The “desired end” need not necessarily be an outcome locatable in the temporal sense. It may, instead, be an ideation of a desired, incorporeal future state which might never be reified.

governmentality to be primarily associated with a state's relationship with its subjects, such a reading is unnecessarily narrow. Governmentality is exemplified throughout the spectrum of social power relationships such as those that exist between patron/client, subject/state, elder/minor, rich/poor, husband/wife, and child/parent.¹²¹ Governmentality achieves through operation of power what social psychology achieves through the roles of social categorization processes and identity theory: the regulation of the social space.

Terrorism is understood as an epiphenomenon in that it both arises from and occurs within a field of normative human social interaction. Events which may be labeled “terrorism,” like all human endeavors, may be understood as artifacts of the alchemy of power; any conceivable circumstance which may be exploited by an actor embodies a relation of power.¹²² The conditionality of this proposition is emphasized in that power is reified in the mere possibility of its operation, but such a possibility must first be conceived by an actor. The terrorist undertakes to create a relation between himself and others which he may exploit to accumulate power. It is the existence of this “exploitable relation” that implies “power.”¹²³ In this line of thought, terrorism is not necessarily bound to any particular social structure or “order.” The actor innovates affordance relations against a deterministic background of understanding: the episteme.¹²⁴ The

¹²¹ Mika Ojakangas, “Michel Foucault and the Enigmatic Origins of Bio-Politics and Governmentality,” *History of the Human Sciences* 25, no. 1 (February 1, 2012): 9, doi:10.1177/0952695111426654.

¹²² This proposition implies that an actor must conceive the relation in order for power to exist. Here I must emphasize Giddens and the *double hermeneutic*. In order for the power relation to exist, it need not be conceived of concurrently by its constituents. In fact, only an external observer may be able to definitively establish what power relations do (or do not) exist in the context of an externally-imposed frame of reference. Such objective knowledge is unattainable to us. We are limited in that truth may never be shown to be more or less than that which we say it to be, this limitation being brought about by virtue of our being participants in the process. For our purposes, as actors engaged in social action (regardless of conflict or other preferences), such an objective perspective is unnecessary, as we inevitably maintain at least a minimum hermeneutic as participants in human life. See, for instance, the discussion in Kyung-Man Kim, “Critical Theory Criticized: Giddens’s Double Hermeneutic and the Problem of Language Game Change,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 4, no. 1 (February 1, 2004): 28–44, doi:10.1177/1532708603254352.

¹²³ In such a formulation, power is not “zero sum”—rather, it is spontaneously reified in the mind of an actor and, subsequently, employed as motivation for interaction with the external world.

¹²⁴ The concept of episteme invoked here is that of Foucault: an epistemological “grounding” of sorts that bounds the possible field of action of an actor. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Psychology Press, 2002).

episteme bounds the realm of conceivability for the actor—in other words, it represents the fundamental matrix through which an actor may *know* and which limits *what may be known* by the actor. Moreover, the episteme is socially constructed—its experience is implicit in the consciousness of the actor, and it is not something that is created deliberatively by the actor. The episteme is not static—it is continually enacted. In short, terrorism can only be said to occur within an episteme in which an affordance relation supporting terrorism is feasible. Such an episteme also bounds any conceivable targets of the terrorist’s endeavor. Thus, the target and the terrorist are, in a sense, mutually constitutive.

The nature of power is itself a subject of inquiry. I argue that power is, simply, that which affords agency to an actor.¹²⁵ Just as the resistance of the earth beneath one’s feet allows him to push upwards against the force of gravity, the various deployments (which Foucault terms *dispositifs*) of power within a society afford its actors a foundation upon which their lives (as action) may ensue. Power does not only exist *between* actors, but it also exists *within* them—that is to say, actors themselves are constitutive of power.¹²⁶ Rosa Luxemburg’s observation on revolt, that “Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently,” is salient.¹²⁷ Insofar as actors are constitutive of power, these actors are also beholden to the dispositifs through which their (the actors’) power relations are realized—or, stated differently, through which actors’ achievement of a desired state of power relations may be frustrated.

¹²⁵ In essence, I adopt the neostructuralist definition of power offered by Heiskala, invoking Kusch, especially in agreement with two premises thereof: first, that all relations between actors are “power relations;” and, second, that there are no power-neutral relations. See Risto Heiskala, “Theorizing Power: Weber, Parsons, Foucault and Neostructuralism,” *Social Science Information* 40, no. 2 (June 1, 2001): 250, doi:10.1177/053901801040002003.

¹²⁶ The constitutive nature of actors in power is foundational to Foucault’s conceptualization of *biopower*. As Heiskala (2001:256) observed, this constitutive role for actors in power relations is central to the analytical methodology of *relational realism* in sociology. Additionally, insofar as power relations imply conflict, the set of “actors” may be extended by post-humanists to include “non humans”—i.e., discounting anthropocentrism and emphasizing the agency of animals, plants, and, in some cases, inanimate objects. See, for instance, Mitchell’s concept of “mundicide.” Audra Mitchell, “Only Human? A Worldly Approach to Security,” *Security Dialogue* 45, no. 1 (February 1, 2014): 5–21, doi:10.1177/0967010613515015.

¹²⁷ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution: And Leninism or Marxism?* (University of Michigan Press, 1970), 23.

To illustrate this point of view, consider, for instance, Sartre's example of the slave who, in deciding whether to break his chains (which he may freely do), experiences an essentially unique and subjective dilemma which cannot be stated in objective terms. While the slave may be said to be *internally* free (perhaps in the Stoic sense), his *functional* freedom—the range and potential effectiveness of possible (future) actions within this particular *dispositif* available to help the slave realize a life of “freedom”—is both limited and defined by his bondage.¹²⁸ Further, the reification of the life-threatening danger posed by circumstance of his slavery will only come to pass in the event the slave decides to revolt.

Three important points for discussion are noted in this illustration. First, the slave “must choose himself *on the ground* of slavery and give meaning to this obscure constraint” (emphasis added)—that is, his agency is uniquely his own in both his ownership of the agency and in its construction within his personal experience of reality.¹²⁹ Secondly, any action taken is of necessity a *meaning-making* activity. Lastly, he has always in mind the possibility of alternate futures. Only the slave can make the determination whether to risk his life or to endure bondage, and deciding either way will define who he is and who he will become. Freedom is “not only the right to do or be, but also the *actual capability* to do or be” (emphasis added).¹³⁰ The essence of such an argument is that all experience implies experience of power relationships, and that those relationships are necessarily subjective in nature. Man is not only what he thinks, but also what he does, a concept relayed by Sartre thus:

Therefore the cause, far from determining the action, appears only in and through the project of an action. It is in and through the project of imposing his rule on all of Gaul that the state of the Western Church appears objectively to Clovis as a cause for his conversion. In other words the consciousness which carves out the cause in the ensemble of the world

¹²⁸ This concept of “functional freedom” is similar to Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach as deployed in the field of international aid and development. S. Tobias, “Foucault on Freedom and Capabilities,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 22, no. 4 (August 1, 2005): 65–85, doi:10.1177/0263276405053721.

¹²⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre and Hazel Estella Barnes, *Being and Nothingness* (Simon and Schuster, 1992), 703.

¹³⁰ Tobias, “Foucault on Freedom and Capabilities,” 71.

has already its own structure; it has given its own ends to itself, it has projected itself toward its *possibles*, and it has its own manner of hanging on to its possibilities: this peculiar manner of holding to its *possibles* is here affectivity.¹³¹

This proposition that views power as reified only in action has become known as “Latour’s paradox”: “No matter how much power one accumulates, it is always necessary to obtain it from the others who are doing the action—this is what I called the shift from diffusion to translation.”¹³² Power is not *collected*, it is *connected*—or, more precisely, power is what makes connectedness visible. It is not a commodity in the sense of something that may be moved around—it is the relational topology through which things move.

As power always exists in relational states, any shift in power implies a reconfiguration of other power relations (either absolutely [zero-sum] or relatively [relative increase/decrease]). Thus, power is not understood just as the measurable, relative accrual of an abstract resource, but rather it may also be construed the ebb and flow of an intangible *field of possibilities* with varying volume (multiplicity), speed (temporal position relative to the present), and resistance (feasibility). In fact, objective assessment of an actor’s power reveals the *plasticity* of power—it is, in a sense, “sticky,” in that power transfers or shifts invoke distributed analysis on the part of a transaction’s affected parties as to how they conceptualize the deployment of power in the pre-, trans- and post-transaction scenarios—with the effect that actors must be certain, to a degree, of how a shift in power will affect them prior to actively participating in a power transition. These concepts are illustrated by Legro’s argument that change in social policies rests upon collective evaluation of the viability of alternative policy arrangements (pre-change) and the efficacy of new policy arrangements (post-change)—and, insofar as actor identities are constituted by power, this line of argument is consistent with the

¹³¹ Italics added. Sartre and Barnes, *Being and Nothingness*, 448.

¹³² Bruno Latour, “The Powers of Association,” *The Sociological Review* 32 (May 1, 1984): 276, doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.1984.tb00115.x. Also, see the discussion in Jonathan Gaventa, “Power after Lukes: An Overview of Theories of Power since Lukes and Their Application to Development,” *Typescript, Brighton: Participation Group, Institute of Development Studies*, 2003, http://www.powercube.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/power_after_lukes.pdf.

proposition that power changes are moderated by the plasticity of the networks being changed.¹³³ Clearly delineating the separate identities of actors involved in conflict, however, is problematic. If the power relations between these actors are mutually constitutive, how can one divide, say, the terrorist from the terrorized?

b. Dissolving Identity

Terrorism works as a phenomenon because its agents and targets are caught up in a state of affairs that affords terrorism the possibility of operation. If the activity observed in terrorism implies that the terrorist and the target are inextricably bound in a web of power and contest, then a question emerges as to exactly how one might neatly define the “identity” of any actor in that reality. Identity of an actor should not be confused with identification of an actor—that is, identifying the status of “United States of America” as a state, organization, or institution is not the same as understanding the “identity” of the U.S. as a particular entity. Additionally, identification is distinct from identity in that the former may be understood in terms of overt interests and capabilities without necessitating the nuance of an in-grained or self-conscious “identity” that drives behavior; identification may be tautological, while identity cannot but be unique.

Regarding this latter concept, two salient theories are social identity theory and identity theory, which both imagine an actor who constitutes his identity through social relations. Social identity theory provides a model in which an individual’s identity is understood as a function of how an individual perceives his membership—or lack thereof—in social groups (more generally referred to as *categories*).¹³⁴ Social identity theory, which bears resemblance to identity theory as discussed below, differs from the latter in its conceptualization of identity salience.¹³⁵ A central premise of social identity theory is that actors engage in an ongoing process of *self-categorization*, in which the self is examined as either similar (*in-group*) or dissimilar (*out-group*) to others. Self-

¹³³ Legro, “The Plasticity of Identity under Anarchy.”

¹³⁴ Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 2000): 225, doi:10.2307/2695870.

¹³⁵ Sheldon Stryker and Peter J. Burke, “The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (December 1, 2000): 284–97, doi:10.2307/2695840.

categorization thus enables a second-order process of *comparison* in which an actor tends to emphasize similarities between himself and his in-groups while simultaneously emphasizing differences between himself and his out-groups. In such a comparison, positively evaluating the in-group as compared to the out-group affords an actor the ability to maintain self-esteem. Affectively, an actor's self-esteem is understood to stem from how he perceives the relative advantage or disadvantage of in-groups versus out-groups.

Underlying both the categorization and comparison processes is the actor's perception of social categories. It is the salience of these categories that drives behavior, and any conceivable difference between an in-group and an out-group can cause an actor to act in a manner that seeks to reify the relative advantage of his in-group over the out-group; and, as demonstrated in a variation of Tajfel's minimal group experiment, salience of relative power may itself be a pre-condition for salience of differential categories to impact behavior.¹³⁶ Even when no out-group may be readily salient (as when an agent acts in solitude), the social categorization process is theorized to be responsible for affect management in a relativistic manner, as the self may be seen to exist as a category of "one" in juxtaposition against conceptualized "others." Agency, in social identity theory, may thus be stated as the desire to maintain a positive self-evaluation (a positive understanding of one's own identity) contra perceived out-groups.

In contrast to social identity theory, identity theory provides a model in which an understanding of individual identity rests upon the centrality of an actor's active and continual awareness, subscription to, and modeling of social roles. Identity theory posits that role-based identities become salient when an actor perceives a situation as not conforming to internalized role standards, thus driving behavior—the process known in identity theory as "self-verification."¹³⁷ Actions performed by an actor may be seen by an outside observer as either verifying or invalidating the role standards prevalent in a particular social group. Identity theory, as summarized by Stryker and Burke, holds that

¹³⁶ Itesh Sachdev and Richard Y. Bourhis, "Social Categorization and Power Differentials in Group Relations," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 15, no. 4 (1985): 431.

¹³⁷ Stryker and Burke, "The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory," 288.

an actor's behavior is "goal-directed" in that it "changes the [actor's] situation *in order to* match meanings perceived in the situation with meanings held in the standard" [emphasis in the original].¹³⁸ Here, "standard" refers to a process in which an actor's decision-making is continuously and actively accessing an internalized conception of role ideals—i.e., a psychological regulating mechanism that allows an actor to determine whether a *perceived* situation is congruent with an *ideal* situation. In the broadest terms, identity theory's implementation of "role" and "standard" imply that an actor will behave in a way that reifies this idealized standard in reaction to otherwise contradictory happenings in situ of experience. An example along these lines might be a parent who, witnessing her child being disrespectful to an older adult, disciplines the child for failure to comply with the "standard," idealized roles. This takes the form of an actor enforcing idealized relations among multiple roles (i.e., submissive child role / dominant adult role), and which, in so doing, the actor reifies (self-verifies) her own role "standard" (disciplinarian parent).

In essence, where social identity theory imagines behavior as driven by the system of groups or categories perceived by an actor (i.e., "There is a group of people I perceive, collectively, as 'leaders' and who share certain attributes. My behavior toward a 'leader' is based on my assumption that all leaders are, essentially, the same."), identity theory instead sees behavior as a function of an actor's internalization of perceived social roles in the form of standards which the actor seeks to reify (i.e., "I believe that a leader should act in a certain way, and my reaction to a leader's actions is a function of how well those actions conform to my standard of how a leader should act in a similar situation."). Identity theory posits that, in the absence of an actor perceiving the transgression of roles, such correcting behavior does not occur. In this sense, behavior within the construct of identity theory may be described as *satisficing* behavior, along the line of explanation offered by the theory of bounded rationality.¹³⁹ Such a descriptive

¹³⁸ Stryker and Burke, "The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory," 288.

¹³⁹ Kristen Renwick Monroe, "Paradigm Shift: From Rational Choice to Perspective," *International Political Science Review* 22, no. 2 (April 1, 2001): 159, doi:10.1177/0192512101222002.

paradigm amounts to a tautology, in that actors' behavior is both exemplified by and embodied in behavior intended toward reification of role ideals and grounded in the "standard"—necessitating the arguably implausible assertion that, if all behavior is essentially "corrective" toward an idealized state, then it must follow that, in the event such an idealized state were achieved, there would be no behavior.¹⁴⁰

In either of the approaches presented above, it may be understood that "identities" are not permanently fixed ideals but are, rather, plastic concepts—templates, in a manner of speaking—the implementation of which changes over time and which may be perceived and employed variably by an actor in a manner that affords that actor with tools for maintaining a positive self-concept and the ability to pursue interests in a social environment. Our identities—our concepts of who we "are" and who others "are"—are a function of what is going on, socially, around us in a continuous evaluation that lacks any fixed boundaries.

3. Searching for Direction

a. *Embodying a Network*

If actor identities are understood as shifting and environmentally-determined, then fixing them is problematic for any observer. Bruno Latour's actor-network theory provides a relativistic method for analyzing the relationship between an actor's identity and an actor's environment by centering its analysis on an emic (from the actors' point of view) understanding of how actors exist and interact within their perceived realities. In Latour's words, actor-network theory aims to describe "the very nature of societies."¹⁴¹ Actor-network theory is amodern and rejects the notion of exogenous constructions (such as history, science, or political systems) as somehow limiting or defining the problem space of sociological phenomena; in this way, actor-network theory runs counter to the memes invoked in structuralist and institutionalist approaches. "It was devised," Latour

¹⁴⁰ Essentially, the subject is always on a trajectory into the future and there is a constant pulling of the subject into the future. The subject can never be fully realized in the "now" yet desires to achieve that realization: "Desire emerges through the subject's "lack"—of never fully being temporally or discursively present." Solomon, "Time and Subjectivity in World Politics," 675.

¹⁴¹ Bruno Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications," *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4 (January 1, 1996): 369.

says, “as a reaction to the often too global concepts like those of institutions, organizations, states and nations, adding to them a more realistic and smaller set of associations.”¹⁴² Actor-network theory does not disavow the analytical utility of these competing concepts; rather, it provides an epistemology within which these concepts may be deconstructed and reinvigorated through an understanding of human experience in interrelationship with the perceived worlds of individual actors.

In Latour’s view, actors themselves may be both human and non-human, and they exist as both discrete instantiations as well as in the form of networks of actors: actor-networks. This dualism is central to the theory. An *actor* in actor-network theory is understood to mean any instantiation of experience that may be differentiated from the background—a detectable (even if only hypothetically so) occurrence that, by virtue of its existence, changes the prior reality. The temporal component is key, but easily overlooked: the mere potential of future action—the possibility of some the projection of power within or upon the network—means the network is constantly in flux. A commonly cited example of an actor-network is an automobile: while the vehicle may be understood as “an actor,” it may also be understood as a “network of actors” insofar as it is constructed of myriad inter-related parts. In the latter view, the network has become a *punctuated actor*—a reduction of convenience that serves to represent how a group of actors may act together and be understood (and interacted with) as a coherent entity rather than as a multiplicity.

Rather than conceptualizing an actor-network as an *assemblage* on the whole, it is important to emphasize that actors define themselves in terms of their relations with other actors. As relational systems, actor-networks should be understood as the medium of representation for instances of *agencement* rather than assemblages of discrete actors insofar as “assemblage” is read to mean a grouping or collection of heterogeneous components or phenomena.¹⁴³ The role of *agency* in *agencement* is central. As actors *jointly define themselves* through their interrelationships with other actors, agency is

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ John Phillips, “Agencement/Assemblage,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2–3 (2006): 108–109.

attributed to the actors. Agency is, in this sense, a potentiality of some eventual “effect.”¹⁴⁴

Consider the example of a man who knows how to make fire by rubbing together two sticks. As this man understands the sticks’ potentiality in their possible use through friction to generate heat and flame, he affords a measure of agency to the sticks above and beyond their being used as, say, tools for digging. The sticks simultaneously afford the man the agency of creating fire. This is power: the affordance of agency to an actor—an actor (a man) defined through his relationship with another actor (sticks), and vice versa. Our “man who creates fire with sticks” holds power that another man, absent this creative knowledge, would lack.

Agencement defines the former man while differentiating him from the latter man: power relationships, once conceived, are enacted through *agencement* and may be understood as constitutive of an actor’s identity through the lens of actor-network theory. But, we must take our example further: it is important to recognize that the *power* of creating fire in this manner exists in the first man’s reality, but it does not exist (and thus holds no relevance) in the reality of the second, ignorant man. This second man may understand and have a relationship with fire as a phenomenon without necessarily understanding how to create or employ it using sticks—that is, without enjoying an agential relationship with sticks as a tool to create fire. The first man knows “sticks as power” in a way that the second man does not.

In this, there is no *translation* of power between the two men’s actor-networks: each man inhabits an utterly different reality from the other. They might share, however, a common understanding of what “fire” is, knowledge of sticks notwithstanding. Thus, their realities may be relatable—their worlds may be translated. Translation, as employed in actor-network theory, “is to establish relationships of equivalence between ideas, objects, and materials that are otherwise different.”¹⁴⁵ Translation may be understood as

¹⁴⁴ Clegg and Haugaard, *The SAGE Handbook of Power*, 126, 127.

¹⁴⁵ Jacqueline Best and William Walters, ““Actor-Network Theory” and International Relationality: Lost (and Found) in Translation,” *International Political Sociology* 7, no. 3 (September 1, 2013): 332–34, doi:10.1111/ips.12026_1.

shared meaning between actors in a manner that facilitates at least a minimum “relationship of equivalence,” but this is not to imply that either actor may attribute other meanings that are not shared between them. Translation, or rather the absence thereof, may be understood as a contributing factor to ethnocentrism. Meanings are only translatable through an actor’s shift from an etic to an emic perspective. So, if meaning is variable between these two points-of-view, how and why might an actor choose between the two alternatives?

b. Questioning Behavior

Both social identity theory and identity theory posit that actors behave in a manner that verifies or supports the maintenance of a positive self-concept in an environment of mentally perceived “others”—either (in social identity’s view) among “in-groups” and “out-groups” or (in identity theory) through idealized forms (standards) of role relations with others that vary with situational context. The question then becomes one of agency. How, and why, do actors rationalize their activity (decisions) in these various spaces? In proceeding to answer this question, Monroe presents seven key assumptions regarding actor agency that have traditionally been set forth along the line of thought that assumes actors make decisions intended to bring about a positive outcome—rational actor theory:

- (1) Actors pursue goals.
- (2) These goals reflect the actors’ perceived self-interest.
- (3) Behavior results from a process that actually involves (or functions as if it entails) conscious choice.
- (4) The individual is the basic actor in society.
- (5) Actors have preference orderings that are consistent and stable.
- (6) If given options, actors choose the alternative with the highest expected utility.

(7) Actors possess extensive information on both the available alternatives and the likely consequences of their choices.¹⁴⁶

This line of reasoning implies several further limitations. First, how much information does an actor take into consideration when making decisions? Simon's theory of bounded rationality proposes that the actor functions within a limited decision space "bounded" by factors such as time, information about the environment, and perceived consequences of action.¹⁴⁷ In this manner, bounded rationality implies that an actor's decision making is a function of his environment, salient cultural influences, mental capacity for critical thoughts, etc.¹⁴⁸ A second limitation stems from societal moderating factors. For instance, certain "decision options" will be salient and plausible in one socio-cultural context while being decidedly implausible in another socio-cultural context.¹⁴⁹ Additional issues arise in the analysis of actor choice in that materialist approaches are invalidated in a conceptualization of choice that accounts for affectual (that is, internal, psychological) outcomes instead of solely accounting for effectual (material, observable) ones. The question put forth above may thus be rephrased as "what does an actor seek to obtain from a particular decision?" Outcome-focused theory has proposed "internal intangible" outcomes in answer to this question, such as the concept of ontological security—the proposition that an actor seeks to maintain a stable understanding of his world and that some decisions (such as self-sacrifice) cannot be understood from a strictly externalist line of inquiry.¹⁵⁰

As Monroe asks, "Why is individual self-interest sometimes pursued and group interest pursued at other times?"¹⁵¹ Rational actor theory and its adjuncts may be understood as "limiting cases" in a broader theory of decision-making that accounts for

¹⁴⁶ Monroe, "Paradigm Shift," 153.

¹⁴⁷ Herbert A. Simon, "Bounded Rationality and Organizational Learning," *Organization Science* 2, no. 1 (February 1991): 125–34, doi:10.1287/orsc.2.1.125.

¹⁴⁸ Monroe, "Paradigm Shift," 154.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 155.

¹⁵⁰ Noa Epstein, "Explaining the War on Terrorism from an Ontological-Security Perspective," *MIT International Review* Inaugural Issue (Spring 2007).

¹⁵¹ Monroe, "Paradigm Shift," 159.

holistic processes and both internalized and externalized “outcomes.” Social identity theory and identity theory both present frameworks for understanding decision-making that account for both *the self* and *others*—actors take decisions *for themselves* but always in context of *others*. Choice thus becomes what Monroe terms a “theory of perspective” in which actors may take up and consider various relations between themselves and their worlds when making decisions; such a process is not limited by strictly external cost-benefit outcome weighting. In such a conception of choice, Monroe posits that the following factors are central to actor decision making and maintenance of agency:

- (1) Actor choice is always a reflection of an actor’s self-concept. It is situational and bounded by identity.
- (2) The importance of normative influence. Actors make decisions in light of the entirety of their life experiences, which are entirely subjective.
- (3) Value conflict. Decisions are made as choices among possibly conflicting influences—i.e., the need to maintain a positive self-concept in a society that idealizes attainment of wealth versus the desire not to be seen by peers as “greedy.”
- (4) Emphasis on the difference between “choice” and “strategy.” Actor choice must account for affect—emotion and self-concept—and may be understood as a strategy to maintain positive affect in the long term even when individual “choices” in the short term may be evaluated by an external observer (who is limited in the availability of an accurate understanding of the actor’s decision space) as “irrational.”¹⁵²

Actor choice may be conceptualized as an evaluative process taking place among a continuum of possibilities constrained by the actor’s experience, socio-cultural situation, and the viability of various options available for employment—i.e., the actor’s episteme. In this line of reasoning, actor choice may be explained in terms of “strategic agency” in that, when taken at face value and evaluated by an external observer, individual decisions in the particular need not necessarily correlate with an actor’s intended longer-term outcomes in a more general sense. In essence, strategic agency implies that actors may “lose battles in favor of winning the war” and that their envisioned outcome may be understood as not merely “more than the sum of its parts”

¹⁵² Ibid., 163–65.

but rather as entirely escaping deduction without due consideration of the overarching, moderating influence of identity and socio-cultural factors and situation limiting and underpinning the actor's agency.

4. Gaining Traction against Reality

a. Empowerment

Insofar as an actor understands his experientially constituted actor-networks of power to align with his strategic agency, he will resist power changes in those actor-networks, because such changes are threatening to him (the strategic agent). Humans are engaged in a continuous struggle between fulfilling their ideals through actions and social roles (“buying-in” to the world as they know it) and, on the other hand, spontaneously deciding to “be someone else,” abandoning both their identity and the actor-networks of power constituting that identity. But, what is power?

According to Clegg, “power is best approached through a view of more or less complex organized agents engaged in more or less complex organized games.”¹⁵³ In his treatise *Frameworks of Power*, Clegg outlines a multitude of possible interpretations of power’s meaning and the analysis thereof. Power may be understood in terms of both “what power is” and in terms of “what power seeks to accomplish”—in other words, power as constitutive of relations (means) or as strategy for manipulating relations (ends) in networks of power with boundless permutations.¹⁵⁴ Power may also be characterized, in Dahl’s famous formulation, as that which affords an actor the ability to compel another actor to perform some action that, absent operation of power, the second actor would not otherwise perform—a formulation that lends itself to separating a problem space into “domains of power” in which an actor may exert variable degrees of power.¹⁵⁵ In this view, a problem of power analysis emerges when one asks if it may be said to exist whether, or only if, it is actualized in an observable manner. Taking the broader view, power may be understood as a capacity or “a facility to cause something to happen”

¹⁵³ Stewart R. Clegg, *Frameworks of Power* (SAGE, 1989), 20.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 38.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 51.

rather than only as that which actually *causes* it to happen—in this way, power is understood as “dispositional” and may exist without ever being exercised.¹⁵⁶ The implication of such a view is that perceptions of power, even when not actualized in an observable manner, do factor into individual decision-making and behavior.

In the analysis of power, one may impose a typology based on both the observed and the hypothesized actualization of power. Clegg provides a comparison of two models addressing power in terms of its “dimensionality” of actualization, as proposed by Lukes and Gaventa, respectively. Each of these models presents power across three dimensions: observed operation of power (power relationships existing in action), observed non-operation of power (power relationships existing but hidden), and the epistemological frameworks that bound the fields of possibility for the first two dimensions (the possibility of power). Gaventa’s model, presented in Table 4, posits that there are (a) realized, observable power relationships, (b) latent power relationships that would otherwise be enacted but that are not enacted due to rational choice (i.e., lack of interest) or lack of opportunity on the part of the actor, and (c) a bounded “field” of possible power relations constructed through the constraints of actor identity, motivation, imagination, and other barriers serving to limit both the conceptualization of and action of power relations generally.¹⁵⁷

The so-called “third dimension” of power may be of special interest in the context of our question insofar as it raises a question of how identity affects an actor’s possible field of action. It is also important to acknowledge the important role played by the concept of relative “perceived weakness” implied in any analysis of power. In many ways, actors may be weak not in intention but rather only in lack of actual capability. Such a distinction is central when separating friend from foe, as applied in Patrick’s survey of the link between state weakness and problems like disease and terrorism: many weak states may be willing to counter threats, but they are materially unable to do so in

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 83.

¹⁵⁷ From Ibid., 110.

an effective manner.¹⁵⁸ While such a capability gap may create an opportunity for a stronger external actor to involve itself and engage its resources to shore up a weaker actor, it also implies interference with existing networks of power in the weaker state. Such events can be destabilizing and initiate a reconfiguration of power and identity relations.

¹⁵⁸ Stewart Patrick, “Weak States and Global Threats: Fact or Fiction?,” *Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2006): 27–53.

Table 4. Gaventa's Three-Dimensional Model

A/B relations	First dimension	Second dimension	Third dimension
Power of A over B	Prevalence of A over B through A's control of superior bargaining resources	A constructs barriers to the participation of B through non-decision-making and the mobilization of bias	A influences and shapes B's consciousness about the existence of inequalities through the production of myths, information control, ideologies, etc.
Rebellion of B against the benefits held by A relative to B	A defeats B owing to B's lack of resources	B does not participate in the existing political agendas because of real and perceived barriers to entry and owing to anticipation by B that to participate would mean defeat	Susceptibility to myths, legitimization of ideologies; a sense of powerlessness; an uncritical or fragmentary and multiple consciousness about issues on B's part as a result of A's influence, shaping and barriers to entry
Powerlessness of B relative to A	Open conflict between A and B, with each holding competing resources, the conflict occurring over clearly defined issues	Mobilization upon issues and action against barriers	Formulation of issues and strategies

Source: Clegg, *Frameworks of Power*, 110.

Power is insidious and evident through all social relations and interactions, whether interpersonal or inter-organizational in nature. In the words of one observer, governmentality is the matrix through which “Power, though far from evenly distributed, floats around [actively] in networks and alliances, inside and around which conflicts and points of resistance are articulated.”¹⁵⁹ The word *actively* is added here to emphasize that the action of power is not through passive processes—rather, actors actively manage their

¹⁵⁹ Dorte Salskov-Iversen, Hans Krause Hansen, and Sven Bislev, “Governmentality, Globalization, and Local Practice: Transformations of a Hegemonic Discourse,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 25, no. 2 (June 2000): 187. The authors’ interpretation of governmentality emphasizes the active, procedural, and exploitative (not malignant, but of general agential utility) nature of the concept: “Governmentality is a way of thinking about how populations—that is, societies—can be regulated,” 191.

interactions and exchanges with consistent attention to how their own power, relative to other actors, might be impacted. Power has utility not only as a resource to be accrued but also as a resource to be expended. Further, it is ephemeral, and exists only insofar as it may provide some utility, especially as power grounds an actor by providing a means of comparison for an actor in contrast to his surroundings: power enables an actor to differentiate among self, other people, objects, environment, and ideas.

Socially, narratives evolve which facilitate one's understanding of how these things are differentiated, how their relations have come to exist, and how they changed over time. Understood in the broadest possible terms, history is that which has been known and which is known today—an entire body of knowledge as known from an individual's unique perspective. There are as many histories as there are people with memories. The past, which is “ever-present,” provides foundation for individual agency and identity. Each man owns the whole of history and, further, is the sole gatekeeper responsible for managing the cultivation and maintenance of his history's narrative. For purposes of analysis, objective history does not exist and is not real. It is, rather, an issue of which—or, more accurately in the social construct, *whose*—story one accepts.

As such, Durepos and Mills posit that a critical understanding of history should be one able to “liberate us from the type of history that is an effect of strict historical conventions designed to impose the idea of an (ultimately) singular history.”¹⁶⁰ Applying actor-network theory (ANT) to the problem of history, these authors propose an “ANTi-history” that exists in the mind of man as a punctuated actor, applying ANT “as an approach for understanding knowledge creation of the past as an effect of heterogeneous actor-networks.”¹⁶¹ The goal of ANTi-history is to provide a new lens for understanding what is known as “past” without the constraints of striving (aimlessly) for a firm definition of “the” past. Objective, “true” history in this regard escapes us. In this concept, the past is understood as emergent: it is always present, and it is always being remade in the mind of the rememberer, as it exists in context of—and in relation with—

¹⁶⁰ Gabrielle Durepos and Albert J. Mills, “Actor-Network Theory, ANTi-History and Critical Organizational Historiography,” *Organization* 19, no. 6 (November 1, 2012): 712, doi:10.1177/1350508411420196.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 708.

present experience. History, in ANTi-history, is by definition a “socio-history.” Socio-history is itself an assemblage—an actor-network—that may be punctuated, held as a coherent “thing,” and exist as an actor.

Two key issues are deduced from the ANTi-history framework. First, history sells itself. Socio-history, when communicated among actors, “flows” like water into nooks and crannies—it is adopted as it is useful to other actors. Wherever it can permeate, it takes hold to some extent. This is the translation of history through the actor-network. Where history fails to translate, alternative histories persist among the actor-networks that either deny or are ignorant of other histories. Secondly, translation of socio-history implies selective exploitation of a narrative. History means whatever the subject wants it to mean. It is twisted and employed in a manner that enhances the agency of the actor-network enrolling the particular historical narrative. History will be enrolled—i.e., it will be meaningful—in a different and unique way depending on how someone is situated and biased in space, time, and disposition of ideology and temperament.

The idea that temporal frames provide material for the discursive construct a subject’s identity can be traced to Heidegger.¹⁶² Reframing this idea through a lens of actor-network theory, however, provides a mechanism for explaining why a particular narrative or received view of the past or future may become integrated into an actor’s self-concept. Selective translation implies that “An interpretation of knowledge of the past or history can only be possible when all of the actors involved in its creation have aligned both their interests and their various interpretations of the past.”¹⁶³ It follows that those who share a particular “interpretive” understanding of the past are likely to also share contemporary interests. It is important to stress that what we are talking about here is the beginnings of belief, and it is through that belief that the past surges through into the present. Whether someone in the 1960s believed that Oswald shot Kennedy, or that he only believes it now—in the present—the effect is the same. Meaning (instrumental, exploitative, agency-giving meaning) is the same across “history” for any given “belief.”

¹⁶² Solomon, “Time and Subjectivity in World Politics,” 675.

¹⁶³ Durepos and Mills, “Actor-Network Theory, ANTi-History and Critical Organizational Historiography,” 715.

b. Searching for Truth

In such a subjective interpretation of reality, objective truth escapes. To know what a thing “is” is to contemplate its use. As an innocent and unknowing child may learn when handling a sharp blade, an incomplete understanding of the various properties and utilities of any entity—any actor—encountered in one’s environment may be perilous. The simultaneous and inextricable perception of an actor and its appurtenant power affordances underpin agency on the part of the perceiver. Such an experience of perception, however, is an active process: a conceptualization, or, more precisely, an *agencement*.

More than simply an imaginary, *agencement* is a creative and constitutive act.¹⁶⁴ From a semiotic point-of-view, these *agencements*, which are epistemically bounded, generate the possibility of agency: to know a knife as “a weapon” is to concurrently reify an understanding of the knife as “not a weapon,” even if, in the latter case, such an understanding is only hypothetical. In short, knowing “what to do with a knife—what it is used for” is also to understand, perhaps quite noticeably, “what not to do with a knife.” For two observers, one of whom perceives stones as stones *per se* and another knowing them as tools, weapons, and ballast, two different truths exist: a stone is just a stone, but it may also be a great many additional things. Two very different actors of “stone” are implied. An analogy may here be drawn with the terminology of gestalt psychology: our understanding of truth in interaction with our world is not merely a limited or representative derivation of an external, objective reality—it is something else entirely, a reality all our own.

This is, essentially, the line of thought put forth by John Dewey’s instrumentalism, a logic of induction.¹⁶⁵ Dewey’s approach has roots in the pragmatist philosophy of Charles Peirce that has been employed in Chapter III – An Ideal Strategy

¹⁶⁴ Consider, for instance, how a label such as “poor” might create a new reality. See Bob Jessop, “Cultural Political Economy and Critical Policy Studies,” *Critical Policy Studies* 3, no. 3–4 (April 28, 2010): 336–56, doi:10.1080/19460171003619741.

¹⁶⁵ Katinka Waelbers and Philipp Dorstewitz, “Ethics in Actor Networks, or: What Latour Could Learn from Darwin and Dewey,” *Science and Engineering Ethics* 20, no. 1 (March 2014): 23–40, doi:<http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1007/s11948-012-9408-1>.

to elucidate the requirements of a conceptual model of strategic reality. As noted by Godfrey-Smith, the objects and technologies a man interacts with may be seen as being “inside, not outside, the mind itself,” and that “it is central to Dewey’s outlook that the entanglement between mind and the rest of nature brought about by communicative technologies is local and constrained, but not in a way that involves a boundary, either standard or unorthodox, between the two.”¹⁶⁶ The reality engaged and reified by Strategos is self-contained; its ontology is closed, but it innovates tools to perceive and navigate the ontology. “Tools,” says Miettinen, “are a means for controlling and steering the interconnections between things and a device for coordinating shared human activities.”¹⁶⁷ Tools may be physical, social, or imaginary: in any case, they are punctuated actors. These punctuated actors may include anything from a light-switch to one’s particular interpretation of a memory or history, or even an interpretation of emotion. The significant turn is that an *experience* is being interpreted in each case: an *agencement* that reconstructs power relations.

Reality, in this view, is a tapestry: “Networks are constantly changing as the multiple agents exert power on each other.”¹⁶⁸ From an emic perspective, decision-making is enabled by the actor’s ability and drive to reconfigure power relations to its own advantage; in appreciation of the complexity and inter-relatedness of the network, any reconfiguration locally implies compensatory reconfigurations distally. Waelbers and Dorstewitz point out that the only thing necessary for intelligent actors to exhibit morality in their decision-making “is the intelligent ability to anticipate consequences and to imagine future scenarios.”¹⁶⁹ Anticipating and compensating for these effects is a derivative act, limited by the actor’s understanding of the larger network; experience and creativity (available *agencements*) bound the episteme of possible courses of action for the intelligent and purposeful actor. These imaginaries, while unseen, exist as actors

¹⁶⁶ Peter Godfrey-Smith, “John Dewey’s Experience and Nature,” *Topoi* 33, no. 1 (April 2014): 7, doi:10.1007/s11245-013-9214-7.

¹⁶⁷ Reijo Miettinen, “Epistemology of Transformative Material Activity: John Dewey’s Pragmatism and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 36, no. 4 (2006): 391.

¹⁶⁸ Waelbers and Dorstewitz, “Ethics in Actor Networks,” 27.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 37.

themselves—the invisible is made visible through cognition. Of those *agencements*, ideals and imaginaries such as memory, identity, values, and physiological and psychological drives are both limiting and enabling.

C. SYNOPSIS

In order for strategy to be considered viable, it must account for two dimensions of analysis: the reality of the actor engaged in strategy—i.e., its own reality, the reality of Strategos—and the actual structure and mechanics of the larger environment in which that actor operates and of which it is a component. In the first dimension we find useful phenomenological concepts concerning what it means to experience reality, such as Martin Heidegger’s *thrownness*. In the other dimension, ideas from pragmatism, such as Peirce’s cenopythagorean categories and Dewey’s instrumentalism, provide tools for understanding how a plurality of realities might be conceptualized. These approaches are not mutually exclusive.¹⁷⁰ The synopsis that follows is a dialectical map of how these two dimensions have been explored above.

First, the state must be able to approach the other actors it interacts with on a common footing. An actor decidedly not a state in its construction or motivation is such a person as might be labeled a “terrorist.” The evident theory which affords a foundation to both states and individuals is constructivism. International relations theory provides models for how we behave in organized state societies, but it does not readily account for the behavior and interests of terrorism, which is disruptive to the international system of states despite arising outside the theoretical frames of international relations thought. Bridging this gap—that we must understand ourselves through one lens while tackling a problem visible only through an entirely different lens—is problematic. Social constructivism provides an answer by affording a frame that accounts for both individuals and states within a common framework that consistently addresses identity and plasticity of interests.

¹⁷⁰ To wit, John Quay has used just such an integrated approach to discuss how the experience of reality impacts contemporary educational paradigms. John Quay, *Education, Experience and Existence: Engaging Dewey, Peirce and Heidegger* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

Second, the state must realize that, on approaching an individual actor, it shares a common world with that actor. In other words, we must be able to speak of the state as being an individual, and vice versa. Providing a framework to encompass the broad spectrum of motivations shared by states and individuals is accomplished through critical theory: the actors in the shared world are reified in power relationships. As each perceives his own power, his perception of the “outside” world is represented in the episteme. Struggle ensues when actors share a world in which epistemic conflict occurs. Social identity theory and others offer insight into how actors rearrange their perceptions of the outside world to provide themselves with salient identity; and, such perceptions fail to account for the underlying, dyadic relationship of the actor in question with the non-actor “rest of the world” each actor perceives. The case in point implies that terrorism cannot occur outside of a world in which terrorism is made possible by the existence of terrorism’s targets: one cannot exist without the other, and thus isolation and circumspect identification of each is impossible.

Third, if actors cannot be uniquely identified without implication of all other actors with which they interact, then a unifying framework of actor identification as a network, rather than as a discrete entity, must be employed. Latour’s actor-network theory provides just such a framework. All that exists is a network; actors may be distilled from the network, but only exist as nodes within a larger web. Without this relational context, each supposed actor dissipates and is not identifiable. Nonetheless, these so-called “actors” within the actor-network do have discernible, individual behaviors. Decision-making is an evaluative process limited by actor perception of the rest of the network. Each actor within the network seeks to maximize its agency relative to the rest of the network.

Fourth, if actors within the actor-network are engaged in decision-making calculus, it must be driven by relative advantage: power. The power relationships being calculated are not overt; rather, the relationships in question are those that bound and limit the field of possible further power relations—they are epistemic power relations. How an actor perceives an episteme of power involves not only the actors position within the observable world but also the actor’s juxtaposition with ideology, history, and other

“punctuated actors” that comprise the actor-network of the subject. As objective reality may only exist for a particular observer, there is no translation of a “true” reality across the actor-network. What a particular actor “knows” is a function of how that actor functions within its own actor-network: what is true is what is useful—what is true is what affords agency within the *entire* perceived network of present, past, and future.

This agency is what all actors seek: strategic agency. All behavior is survival behavior. If this maxim is to be taken as true, it must be qualified. While behavior can be observed, quantified, and analyzed, the meaning of “survival” is more difficult to establish, especially for non-human or non-intelligent actors. Our understanding of “survival” in a human sense cannot be limited to persistence in the temporal, worldly sense: self-sacrificing decisions are a testament to this. Instead, survival must mean continually positioning oneself to maintain agency against a background that includes both the observable and the unobservable worlds—history, emotion, and imagination. Strategic agency is the drive of each actor which seeks to position the actor in just such a way as to maximize its potential relative to and in consideration of the real yet sometimes unseen actor-network in which the actor is reified.

Each perceiving actor—each Strategos—within the network is a locus of inquiry for strategy. While these actors are partially constitutive of the larger network, they are joined in that network by other actors: the environment, food, water, buildings, animals, and so forth. Strategos discerns and manipulates other actors in its perceived world in an effort to maintain strategic agency. What Strategos discerns about the network is that which it may leverage after and in consideration of the moderating effects of the rest of the network which also exert leverage upon Strategos. Returning to the question of how the state might best approach an individual actor, we now see that each seeks its own strategic agency. Each exists within a unifying, underlying ontology or framework—the actor-network—that allows us to discern these and other actors juxtaposed against each other. What each “knows” is a function of its own derived power episteme; each can only know that which affords power, and each exists as a part of the larger network.

V. A SYNTHETIC MODEL OF STRATEGY

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.

— William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

A. PERCEPTION: PROPOSITIONS ABOUT STRATEGOS

If we were to outlay a set of conditions from which a synthetic model for strategy formulation might be constructed, then proposition zero might be that there exist semiotic actors in an infinite regression that begins with the “self” versus the “non-self” world and proceeds experientially and temporally from that point of distinction. This is essentially similar to the “thrownness” of Martin Heidegger.¹⁷¹ Strategos, the perceiving self, is not born *into* the world: Strategos reacts against the world, and so reifies it. To not react would be to dissipate into the background, as a drop dissolves into the ocean—a loss of agency. The reaction and reification—the possibilities for Strategos opened up by “existence as existence”—closely correspond to Heidegger’s concept of “projection.”¹⁷² Strategos struggles to maintain its identity, to leverage its relations with the actor-network in which it is defined, by agglomerating power for itself relative to the other actors it perceives, including its own internalized narratives and ideals. Strategos sets foot into the world and seeks to gain traction upon it. All ensuing behavior is survival behavior intended to maintain agency for Strategos.

We may then begin to understand how Strategos pursues different strategic agencies depending upon its particular perception or interpretation of the actor-network. On the one hand, Strategos may perceive only that part of the world that is commonly considered to be immediately observable, seeking evident gains and dealing with “facts” at face value—epistemological reductionism. On the other hand, Strategos may take a

¹⁷¹ Jeffrey L. Powell, “Heidegger and the Communicative World,” *Research in Phenomenology* 40, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 66, doi:10.1163/008555510X12626616014628.

¹⁷² Ibid.

broader, more circumspect perception, and seek to exploit less obvious connections in the actor-network. Such a strategy would entail allowing the network to work mostly for itself in its primordial parts while accounting for differing perceptions on the part of the other actors represented by these various “parts”—epistemological pluralism, i.e., a recognition that the actors in the network behave in sometimes unanticipated ways. That the entire network is connected (relationally constituted) and has—even in absence of purposeful interference by Strategos—something resembling a trajectory of its own that builds out of the cumulative agencies of all the network’s constituents is not disputed; in fact, that background collective agency or trajectory of the network in which the Strategos exists could be seen as the natural course of the system, corresponding somewhat to the *dao* of Chinese philosophy.¹⁷³ Even if, in this latter case, Strategos adopts a policy of “non-interference” with the network, it still exists as a constituent of that network, only “going along” with the other actors so as to maximize congruence of its own actions with those of others.

How Strategos perceives its world—its reality—may be described across two dimensions: ontology and locus of power. In the ontological dimension, Strategos perceives a world of varying constitution, ranging from the simple to the complex. A simple world is comprised of few “parts”—Strategos sees a limited number of actors, perhaps punctuated actors with relatively limited motivations or potentials, in an epistemologically reductionist world. A complex world, in contrast, is populated by numerous other actors, each with its own motivations and desires; this is the world of epistemological pluralism, where Strategos possesses knowledge about how each constituent of its actor-network functions and how it is motivated, in turn appreciating that each actor enjoys its own particular interpretation-in-fact of the shared reality. Strategos also positions itself relative to how power relations are shared between itself and the rest of its world. Acknowledging that the actor-network is mutually constructed by power relations, Strategos may understand itself as having power over other actors and also that other actors have power over Strategos. In the extremes, these two cases can

¹⁷³ Steven Burik, *The End of Comparative Philosophy and the Task of Comparative Thinking: Heidegger, Derrida, and Daoism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 135.

only represent reductionism; for Strategos to be powerless, it must be overwhelmed by the coalescing external influences brought on by the strategic agency of the network's other actors. By contrast, an all-powerful Strategos must exert power over all other actors in the network, thereby creating a reductionist duality, as in the former case.

A diagram depicting the continuum across which Strategos perceives its strategic environment is presented in Figure 3, Continuum of Strategic Perception. At position (A) in the figure, Strategos would embody its own power over the rest of the network, thus, at the extreme, simplifying the network into a dyad: a free, independent Strategos juxtaposed against that which Strategos seeks to leverage to its own advantage, an ultimate self-centeredness. Such a Strategos would embody god-like qualities amid a simple environment in which it controls all things and is controlled by nothing external to itself. At the other end of the spectrum, represented by position (B), Strategos would embody its own powerlessness over its world; Strategos has no freedom or independence, and its world is a prison—everything that Strategos “is” is defined by externals over which it has no influence. This Strategos would, perhaps, be the ultimate passive participant, in a way truly “one” with and indistinguishable, to an outside observer, from its environment—a subliminal actor with no cogent self-perceived identity, unnoticed and unappreciated without a targeted inquiry and creative reflection by an outside observer that induces an identity upon the actor and moves it away from the penultimate reductionist state and discriminates it as a monad against the background.

What Strategos “sees” is power. Strategos itself is seen as a powerful force. When the agency of a particular actor is seen as congruent with the strategic agency of Strategos, that actor is seen as friendly or beneficial. By contrast, when an actor's power potential is non-congruent with the strategic agency of Strategos, that actor is considered a threat. How Strategos interacts with these other actors define what Strategos “is”—the relations constitute the actors.

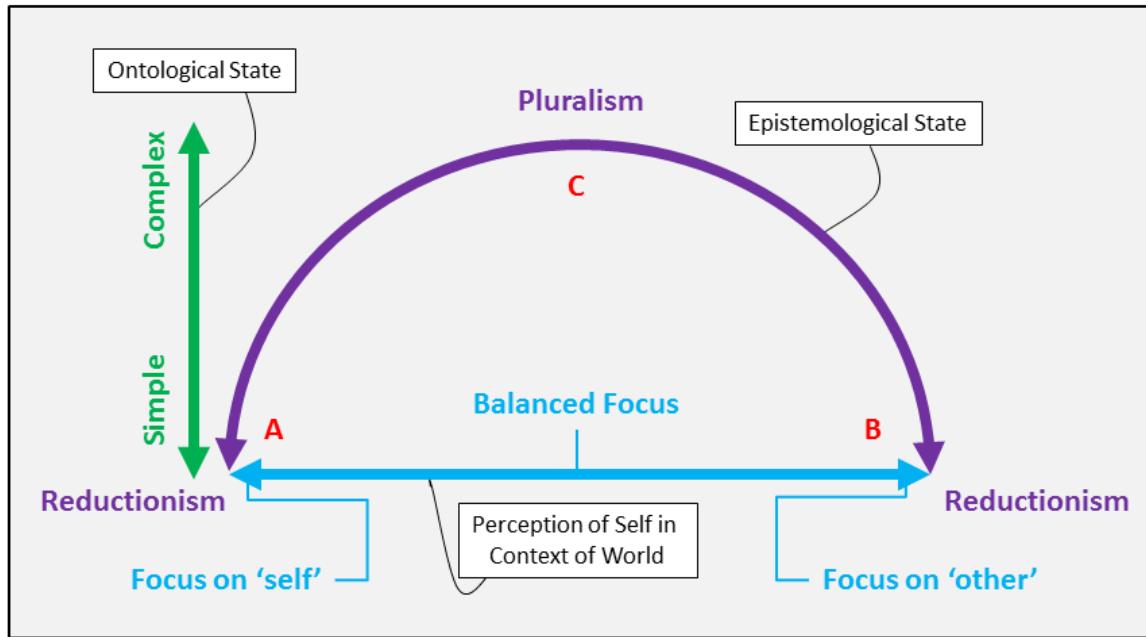


Figure 3. Continuum of Strategic Perception

It is important to note that the power relations also constitute Strategos; thus, for example, in case (A) as presented in the figure, Strategos is discursively defined by that over which it exerts power—a simple understanding of the world, in which changing the nature of those things is to change Strategos, with such a contingency likely being perceived as ontologically threatening to Strategos—and vice-versa in case (B). Recognizing that, we contrast these two extremes to that of position (C), where Strategos understands a balance of power between itself and the rest of the actor-network in which it exists. The balanced actor-network is occupied by other actors, each of which enjoys its own strategic agency in a pluralist construction. This position along the spectrum of perception is also, however, a world of complexity; and, in that complex network, Strategos struggles to reach an equilibrium point with other actors such that its own strategic agency is balanced amidst the rest of the network.

As an example, in the abstract, the United States is an actor that is constituted by and draws power from a number of other actors: the geographic region occupied by its territory; its population; its natural resources; ideals like “freedom” and the rule of law; a particular national history; an image of esteem among its peers; and, its military forces,

among numerous others. Without these things, the United States does not exist. If these things cease to give power to the United States, then it is weakened. If other actors subvert or overshadow the constitutive powers of the United States, those actors constitute a threat to the United States in terms of identity (present empowerment) and continued existence (future empowerment)—threatening its strategic agency. As the actors which constitute the United States change and evolve over time, the United States itself changes and evolves. The question for the strategist is to what extent the United States defines, in present and in future tense, its circumstances—the actors which constitute its identity—and to what extent it is defined by its circumstances. A balanced understanding of how these factors mutually define each other while also representing the entity we know as “the United States” is essential to analysis of the situation and to the development of strategic purpose for the Strategos of the conceptual reality—the United States.

B. REALITY: THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC AGENCY

Latour’s description of how actor-networks model the “real” world is simply related: “things do not hold because they are true; which is the story spun by science in the classroom. Instead, he argues, things are true *because they hold.*”¹⁷⁴ Realizing that each actor exists semiotically with the rest of its actor-network, these actors perceive each other in terms of how they afford power—their *agencement*: what they represent, what they can be used for. As an actor perceives the world in which it exists and interacts, its actions are informed and guided by its effort to leverage power in its environment, its actor-network. Strategos, like all actors, is motivated to maintain strategic agency in its relations with other actors.

Objective reality, in this model, is featureless and “smooth.” Reality is undiscriminated and undivided; it is, in the words of William Blake, “Infinite.” As an observer begins to discern his own separateness from his environment, and begins further dividing his thoughts and sensations and the features he identifies in his environment, a semiotic avalanche occurs. Who the observer is, is a function of what he perceives. As his

¹⁷⁴ Emphasis in the original. Clegg and Haugaard, *The SAGE Handbook of Power*, 132.

perceptions take form through *agencement*, they both empower and constitute the identity of the observer. He is defined by that which he can discern and leverage. The actor-network embodied through his perception—his experience—is entirely his own, and does not correlate to “objective reality”—it is merely derived from it. The observer cannot engage his world in any way which lessens his agency in that world. At any given time, the net constitution of the observer, as derived from the actor-network power relations which constitutes him, is his “strategic agency;” this is the power he holds in the network and the power the network holds over him. As the network changes, the observer will either change or resist change, but will always maximize its strategic agency in relation to the changing and reconfigured network. For our model, we call the observer “Strategos,” and we call his experienced world “strategy.”

The three requirements of an ideal strategy as set forth in Chapter III, *An Ideal Strategy* are handling of actor identity, a model of actor behavior, and a system of actor description. Building these from Charles Peirce’s three categories, we may then postulate that, firstly, identity—a concept that constrains the field of “what *is* an actor” and “what *is not* an actor”—emerges from a boundless background of power in the most abstract sense. Secondly, the interactive behavior of actors—how they are motivated and why they do the things they do—is determined by their being constructed of power relations; it is only the effect of these constitutive power relations that enable us to discern one actor from another, though this is a hidden, subliminal phenomenon. Thirdly, description is the domain of the emergent epistemology that is subjectively experienced by each observing actor in the strategy; the diverse world of description is one of labels, logics, and discursive experiences in which each actor is grounded by its own strategic agency. Ergo, we may set forth a distilled framework that describes what strategic agency is, what it does, and how it is useful, formulated as follows:

- (1) Power is that which affords agency to an actor.¹⁷⁵
- (2) Actors are reified in terms of their power affordances to each other.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Recalling Peirce’s categories, point (1) of the framework would correlate with the monad “world” background, a void without form in which there is only an abstraction of power.

- (3) Observed actors may be human or non-human.¹⁷⁷
- (4) Actors are relationally constituted in actor-networks.
- (5) Actor-network relations are plastic.
- (6) All relations within the network of actors are power relations.
- (7) Actor identity is a function of power affordance relations within the actor-network.
- (8) A network of actors may be understood as an agglomerate actor (the punctuated actor).
- (9) The past (socio-history) and imagined futures exist as punctuated actors.
- (10) Intentionality of actors is driven toward reification of the particular punctuated actor-network (episteme of power relations) that affords an actor the maximum relative level of power: *strategic agency*.

Power is understood to be anything which affords agency to an actor; agency in this sense is the ability to act, to do... to exist. Actors are themselves *agencements*. Discursively, the mere existence of other actors affords distinction of identity, and thus some element of power. In order for an actor to exist and have identity, it must exist in context of other actors—for instance, “I” versus “not-I”—in an actor-network. The plural in “actors” is significant. For the actor pair to exist, it must be observed, either by a third external actor, or by one of the two actors which has the ability to perceive the passage of time. In the latter case, the temporal perception creates the necessary third actor: the past, contra the present. Wherever an actor is identified as distinct from other actors, each actor holds implicit power insofar as each actor “is” something that another may wish to become, to say nothing of influence over other actors. In the actor-network, power scales without being destroyed; this is true regardless of whether multiple actors are

¹⁷⁶ Taking Peirce’s second category, we begin in point (2) of the framework to differentiate discrete entities from each other, albeit in a manner that is hidden from higher-order observation.

¹⁷⁷ At point (3) of the framework, we emerge to Peirce’s third category; this and all subsequent points of the framework thus comprise the epistemic, observable features and relations of the strategic conceptual reality.

agglomerated into a punctuated actor or vice-versa, where actors are subdivided into multiple constituent actors.

Actors' ability to perceive other actors' existence is a function of perceiving actor's comprehension of how other actors may afford power. That which cannot be exploited or mentally manipulated as a unique concept, category, or phenomenon, does not exist in the reality of the perceiver. In this vein, "actor" can include any unique concept, category, or phenomenon. Actors may be people, but also ideas, narratives, abstract concepts like "nation-state" or "freedom," and also non-human elements of the environment, such as plants, animals, and built structures. All of these concepts represent power in some form, as they are leveraged by other actors. Within the actor-network, each actor is relationally constituted. The power affordances which actors exploit among each other may be relatively less or more important or useful, but all relations are power relations. The relations between actors—how power is leveraged among them—allow actors to be discerned and identified. Likewise, a change in the actor-network—a change in power relations—is always compensated elsewhere in the network. Power is never lost or destroyed, only translated across the network: relations in the actor-network are plastic.

Actors identify other actors in terms of how power relations are distributed across the network. Multiple actors may be perceived as a single actor (for instance, a car, versus a collection of independent components which makes up the car), known as a punctuated actor. Likewise, the past (a punctuated actor) is constituted of multiple related but distinct memories and narratives. The future is similarly constructed. Intelligent actors with the ability to perceive the past and possible futures are constituted just as much by their relations with these actors as they are by their relations with other physical actors (i.e., the observable world). Actors are motivated to maintain agency in the context of other actors in the actor-network. All observed behavior of actors is intended toward maintenance of agency in the entire actor-network as perceived by that actor at the time the action is taken: this is strategic agency.

Ties in relational networks have two fundamental attributes: form and content.¹⁷⁸ Form refers to “how” nodes in the network are connected; content refers to what is transferred across each connection. In the actor-network of strategic agency, the form of the relations is power, and their content is identity; these are two sides of the same coin. It is important to not assume “wholeness” of the network; this is an implicit flaw of institutionalism and structuralism, which position institutions (like states) and structures in a vacuum absent other types of actors, denying the analytical relevance of other types of actors. In this vein, relationality is sometimes presented in a negative light as being tautological. For instance, Stewart Clegg raises one potential concern:

How is institutional change possible if actors’ intentions, actions, and rationality are conditioned by the institutions they wish to change? In other words, how can they exert agency as power against those structures that constrain them, if those structures do, indeed, constrain them? How do we avoid reducing structure to action, or action to structure, or of merging both? Either actors’ freedom or structural constraint must be denied. The answer resides in developing a more focused way of thinking about practices as standing at the intersection of structure, events, and experiences.¹⁷⁹

The strategic agency framework offers a solution to this problem. The “answer” does not rely in a more nuanced understanding of a dyad, as Clegg suggests. Instead, when two equal but opposite actors which are mutually constituted by power relations are in conflict, the analyst must broaden the scope of the network beyond the two opposing actors. Including other actors (in this example, non-institutional actors) as part of the actor-network will allow the analyst to take account for how the two opposing actors draw power from their networks. In other words, yes, actors are mutually constituted through relations. Their mutual constitutions do not, however, fully define the entire network. Each will have its own empowerments from other actors—like capital, political support, and geography—which will determine the eventual outcome of conflict. Each of

¹⁷⁸ Emily Erikson, “Formalist and Relationalist Theory in Social Network Analysis,” *Sociological Theory* 31, no. 3 (2013): 226.

¹⁷⁹ Stewart R. Clegg, “The State, Power, and Agency: Missing in Action in Institutional Theory?,” *Journal of Management Inquiry* 19, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 11, doi:10.1177/1056492609347562.

these other actors, in turn, is constituted by other actors. To measure these factors in sum is to measure the strategic agency of each opposing actor against that of the other.

For Strategos to employ strategy, a network must be constructed. That network must embody the actors with which Strategos will interact. These may be states, social groups, natural resources, non-state and sub-state actors, tools, defining values and narratives, and other relevant points of consideration. In the case of a state strategy, the array of actors might include, for starters:

- Regions and formal regional institutions
- International bodies and organizations
- States and state resources, like military and diplomatic mechanisms
- Sub-state regions and state institutions
- Ethnic and religious groups and sects
- Elements of national and cultural identity like landmarks and contested narratives
- Critical transportation pathways like ports and pipelines

To develop a strategy, each of these collections of actors would be established first as an entity, and then, in turn, subdivided into its constituent actors. The level of detail to be developed must be sufficient to develop a useful analog of real-world actors. Understanding the strategic agency of each actor—what each actor “wants” and “wants to be”—in context of the larger network would then allow actors to be grouped according to analytical themes, like geographic location, commonalities of culture or faith, commonalities of dependencies upon other actors (such as conventional resource requirements in the vein of defense and industry), or other useful categories. Each actor of the emergent actor-network constitutes a node in the complex system of the strategy. Greater interconnectedness among these nodes implies greater complexity, but also a more accurate representation of reality. Once modeled, specific courses of action may be analyzed for their potential effect on the actor-network. These courses of action, in the

broad and communicated context of the actor-network from which they derive, constitute the strategy.

Such a strategy would, in sum, answer the three requirements of an ideal strategy as set forth in Chapter III, An Ideal Strategy:

- (1) Handling of actor identity
- (2) Model of actor behavior
- (3) Actor description

The framework presented here allows actor identity to be articulated across a continuum to whatever level of detail is determined as appropriate by the analyst. All actor behavior is understood to be intended toward maintenance of agency in the context of the contemplated network (strategic agency). Also, actors may be described by their relations to other actors or by any other frame of convenience, such as by their conventional labels or functions, without reference to any externally-imposed theoretical typology—terms like “state” and “institution” may be used in their vernacular sense without necessarily loading the strategy with esoteric theoretical frames or concepts.

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VI. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

All revolutions naturally appear novel when contrasted with the status quo against which they react.

—Adrian Johnston, *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive*

A. APPLICATION

Theories of society, such as those invoked in international relations and political science, often invoke universal laws and concepts that are more categorizing than animating. Marxism and the structuralism of class conflict provides a ready example, as do theories relying on similar overt categorizations—Huntington’s civilizations, for instance. In the other extreme, theory positing the individual as forever locked behind a veil of impenetrability and epistemic subjectivity offers little hope for explaining macrosocial phenomena as anything other than coincidence, hence the difficulty experienced by social constructivists in articulating a comprehensive theory without necessitating the buttresses of culture, organizational psychology, and the like. As an alternative, the analyst may turn away from the endings and beginnings of society—the individual and the world polity—and look instead on the processes in action between these extremes. The employment of “mechanisms and processes,” as noted by Bousquet and Curtis, obviates the need for identification of “general covering laws” and “avoids the pitfalls of various forms of methodological and phenomenological individualism, on the one side, and holistic and structuralist accounts, on the other, by focusing on the interactions and processes that bind and reconfigure individual entities.”¹⁸⁰ The actors of the strategic agency model are not phenomenologically privileged; while they do enjoy their own particular perspectives and identities, they also interact and translate power across the network. The strategic agency model provides advantages over other models in

¹⁸⁰ Antoine Bousquet and Simon Curtis, “Beyond Models and Metaphors: Complexity Theory, Systems Thinking and International Relations,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 24, no. 1 (March 2011): 49, doi:10.1080/09557571.2011.558054.

that it facilitates analysis that is methodologically neutral, amoral, ahistorical, astructural, and apolitical. The model also obviates the need for fundamental reliance on derived mimetics such as “strategic culture,” Huntington’s “civilization” concept, “religion,” or “ethno-nationalist identity,” instead providing a framework in which these memes may be applied at the discretion of the analyst to facilitate mapping power relations in actor-networks pre-, trans-, and post-strategy implementation.

The utility of the strategic agency model is entirely circumstantial. Its accuracy in correlating strategy or analysis to real-world observed events is dependent upon how the analyst understands the actor-network and appreciates the strategic agencies of the actors invoked in that network. In international relations, for instance, more information would seem to be better. A state is a state, and yet a state is many things. To build out an actor-network of states *only* would still involve some understanding of how each state will seek to maximize its position relative to other states. Adding to this base layer of analysis, additional considerations are possible (and appropriate), such as: how power will be evaluated by peers in the network (monetarily, militarily, diplomatically); how domestic factors may influence the state’s actions internationally (by detracting focus from world affairs or by encouraging outward-focused behavior and projects); how particular narratives important to national identity must be maintained; and how non-state actors will influence the state’s interactions with other states. Each of these additional factors itself becomes an actor in the actor-network; each enjoys a strategic agency of its own. To the extent an analyst introduces external typologies (like “state,” “group,” and “money”) into the analysis, the utility of the strategic agency model will be limited. Each external category or concept introduced serves to generate a “punctuated actor” in the network, which may serve to facilitate easier analysis by simplifying the larger actor-network at the cost of analytical detail.

As discussed in Chapter II, The Evident Strategy, one exigency of national security strategy is the ability to account for complex motives and behaviors by actors. Strategic agency allows the definition of an actor—a state or an armed group, for instance—while also affording analysis of how that actor might engage in behaviors that seem incidental to the received view of what its motivations might be. For instance,

consider that in the summer of 2016, the Libyan National Army (LNA), a politically-affiliated militia force, ostensibly engaged in a fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS), turned its efforts to gain control of key oil production facilities. The LNA used “counter-ISIS operations as cover to project influence” over the petroleum production sites.¹⁸¹ While conventional frames might suggest that the LNA would seek to defeat the ISIS influence in its region, the strategic agency model allows a more nuanced analysis. For starters, strategic agency encourages the analyst to ask first how the LNA, however defined, exerts leverage in its environment—such as through funding, political influence, or attainment of status among peer groups. Another relevant example is that Russia, while performing anti-ISIS operations in Syria, may be seeking to exploit Russian involvement in the region to deploy an anti-ship missile capability which would “deny the U.S. freedom of movement and increase the Kremlin’s ability to pressure the U.S. into accepting its expansionist military agenda.”¹⁸²

In both of these cases, strategic agency implies that an analyst formulating strategy should account for the fact that any actor involved will seek to leverage the totality of circumstances to its own advantage. This has implications for coalition-building and for security management at home and abroad.

In security analysis, understanding that all actors seek to maintain strategic agency begs a question of how each actor will work to exploit current events, its involvement in particular affairs, and the involvement of others to its own advantage. This is not a “zero-sum” analysis—the shifts in relative power implicit in world affairs necessitate a continual cycle of action-reaction and compensatory adjustments. Individual human actors need food, water, space, and freedom to operate. Once those are acquired, they will leverage their relationships with each other and with the rest of their environment to persist. Their efforts in persistence will be moderated by available

¹⁸¹ Emily Estelle, “GNA-Allied Forces Seize Momentum against ISIS in Sirte | Critical Threats,” *American Enterprise Institute Critical Threats Project*, June 10, 2016, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/libya/estelle-gna-allied-forces-seize-momentum-against-isis-sirte-june-10-2016>.

¹⁸² Hugo Spaulding, “Russia Security Update: February 24-March 3, 2016,” *Institute for the Study of War*, accessed July 7, 2016, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-security-update-february-24-march-3-2016>.

resources and idealized factors like “values” and “culture” to the extent that these, as actors themselves, continue to afford power.

The 2015 United States National Security Strategy (NSS), as presented, is not about what “they” want—it’s about what “we” want. In a very real way, the reality presented in the NSS is a half-truth: it presents a façade, an array of the faces of the “others” occupying the world of the United States; but, behind the façade, the NSS utterly fails to account for what these “others” want out of the world—what empowers the “other.” The motivations and desires of these other actors are not inconsequential. For a strategy to be tenable, it must afford the strategist an ability to predict the outcome of his interactions with a broad field of “others.”

B. ANALYTICAL IMPLICATIONS

For the analyst, the strategic agency framework may be distilled into a series of maxims. Succinctly, one may say simply that discourse is power, and power is everything; but, specifically:

- (1) You only perceive what you can leverage. For all practical purposes, nothing else exists.
- (2) Everything you perceive in the world empowers you. Terms, concepts, narratives, and categories are important.
- (3) You are defined by what empowers you, by the things you can leverage and react against. You are defined as much by your fears as by your goals. Your perception of your place in the world defines how you will interpret novelty; change is fluid, not abrupt, and “new” things will always be interpreted in context of prior things.
- (4) Contraversion is important. It is impossible to define victory without defining defeat. Pay attention to both, and take care to articulate the important but often-unspoken things.
- (5) Hierarchies and categories are merely descriptive frames superimposed atop an underlying network. In every case, categories and groupings move the analysis toward reductionism and away from the zenith of complexity which most closely correlates with the likely behavior of the network in reality.

(6) Things which empower multiple actors are likely to be contested. Special focus on an accurate and nuanced understanding of how identity and meaning of these contested actors is translated across the network is crucial. Don't focus on dominating a narrative. Focus instead on how various interpretations of a narrative empower those who contest it.

As two examples of this approach, let us consider contemporary Russia. In 2014, observers noted that "Russia's desire to build a Eurasian Union around itself is a captivating puzzle for political scientists and everyone interested in current international developments."¹⁸³ The Eurasian Economic Union seeks to pursue a policy of deep integration, in many ways a re-joining of independent states once part of the former Soviet Union, and Russia is seeking to enhance its ability to strike trade and security deals with its neighbors (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan).¹⁸⁴ The actors involved are not just the states named, but also the European Union (in some ways, an antagonist) and domestic constituencies in each state. In the case of Russia, an important domestic actor is the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC); the ROC has been seen as a vehicle for advocating Russian state policies abroad.¹⁸⁵ From the strategic agency perspective, one might ask several key questions:

- (1) From what does the ROC draw power? Likely answers include its adherents and its relationships with states and non-state actors.
- (2) How does the ROC constitute national identity for the states of the Eurasian Economic Union? In states where the ROC is highly represented, it is likely to be used as a vehicle to further Russian policies of expanding and cementing the Union.
- (3) If threatened, such as by a turn away from religion, is the Russian state likely to respond to shore up the ROC? Such a response might involve the state advocating religious beliefs and the role of the church.

¹⁸³ Viatcheslav Morozov and Karmo Tuur, "Russian Federation 2014: Short-Term Prognosis" (Tartu: University of Estonia Press, January 2014), 7, <http://www.ut.ee/ABVKeskus/sisu/prognoosid/2014/en/pdf/RF2014.pdf>.

¹⁸⁴ David G. Tarr, "The Eurasian Economic Union of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and the Kyrgyz Republic: Can It Succeed Where Its Predecessor Failed?," *Eastern European Economics* 54, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 1–22, doi:10.1080/00128775.2015.1105672.

¹⁸⁵ Morozov and Tuur, "Russian Federation 2014: Short-Term Prognosis," 44.

(4) Might the ROC be a potential target for actors wishing to weaken Russian influence in its region? If yes, then one might explore exactly how the ROC would be targeted—perhaps through the introduction of “competing” values, i.e., Western values.

A preliminary analysis like that above would yield an understanding that the Russian Orthodox Church is a central part of what may be called “Russia,” that Russia and the ROC might react negatively to the introduction of competing narratives (like Western secularism and the turn away from religiosity) because they serve to decrease the power of the ROC and therefore of the Russian state.¹⁸⁶ A more in-depth analysis might examine how the ROC is engaged locally throughout its footprint; i.e., how does the ROC provide power to local populations, such as through provision of identity and socio-cultural security and involvement in local politics?

As another example, consider the issue of Russia and “non-Western” science, which represents a politicization of choice. Some Russian academics have shut-out non-Russian science and theory for basically political purposes, but they have provided a faux-scientific reason for doing so.¹⁸⁷ This tendency builds upon and perpetuates a narrative of conflict between Russia and the West, where “the boundary between the West and the non-West takes ontological priority to any dividing line in social and cultural reality.”¹⁸⁸ The allegation is that Western thought is somehow polluting the purity of Russian intelligentsia, and, further, that any of the West’s so-called “universal values” are inherently detrimental to Russia because they have originated in the West. This has resulted in science driving “theory designed as purposely non-Western,” which ignores the cost that such a theory will be “bound to remain self-referential and, in the final analysis, irrelevant.”¹⁸⁹ It is important to also recognize that Russian state reforms of higher education have resulted in dramatic cuts to universities and pushback from academia, including “mass protests against the reformation of the Russian Academy of

¹⁸⁶ This is essentially what has transpired. *Ibid.*, 41–44.

¹⁸⁷ Andrey Makarychev and Viatcheslav Morozov, “Is ‘Non-Western Theory’ Possible? The Idea of Multipolarity and the Trap of Epistemological Relativism in Russian IR,” *International Studies Review* 15, no. 3 (September 2013): 328–50, doi:10.1111/misr.12067.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 342.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 343.

Science ... and the efficient exposure of a long list of faked or plagiarized dissertations defended by high officials” and others.¹⁹⁰ In light of these facts, an analyst might begin an inquiry along these lines:

- (1) What is the relationship between the Russian state and its academic institutions? A goal here might concern establishing a tolerance level at which the Russian state would be degraded by fomenting unrest among its academic community; i.e., an understanding of how likely the state is to support pro-regime academics and attempt to control its academic institutions for state benefit.
- (2) Where do Russian academicians draw their power? Some esteem and opportunities for professional advancement might be domestic and others international. These may be incongruent; some researchers may be motivated to participate in a broader international dialog, while others may be motivated to play to the interests and motives of nationalism.
- (3) What are the artifacts of power in Russian academia? Empowering achievements might include the freedom to publish in international and domestic journals, access to state-controlled research facilities, and promotional opportunities within the education bureaucracy.

For the development of strategy, these two cases provide insight. An understanding that the Russian state is comprised in part by the ROC and by its academic community facilitates a more nuanced appreciation for how the state itself might behave at a macro-scale. When combined with analysis of other sectors—economic, defense, political, etc.—the strategic agency for the state can be distilled. With this in hand, the analyst may proceed to construct a strategy to deal with each of these actors in turn.

As we have seen, the 2015 NSS is concerned with not only states but also with non-state actors—namely, terrorist groups. Much of the dialectic presented in Chapter IV, Illuminating Strategos is approached from the perspective of terroristic conflict, which prompts an explanation of how the analytical maxims of strategic agency might be

¹⁹⁰ Morozov and Tuur, “Russian Federation 2014: Short-Term Prognosis,” 57.

applied to a terrorist or terrorist group. Let us consider, then, a hypothetical terrorist, perhaps a violent Salafi jihadist (VSJ).¹⁹¹

Taking the first maxim, “you only perceive what you can leverage,” we must ask, “What is perceived?” If a man is perceived, we must ask, “through which frame do we perceive the man?” If the man is an Arab, is that man perceived through frames of Western individualism, or Arab collectivism?¹⁹² If the former, our analysis of the man will tend more toward a depiction that tends to isolate the individual in a way that fails to capture important cultural features which blur the lines between the individual and the family—as well as other social groups—more so than in Western culture. Likewise, if the individual is an American VSJ who has a more individualistic bent, we may also account for how that individual’s perception of reality and his place among his peers is cast in a different light from, say, his Arab VSJ peers; i.e., we may recognize that an individualistically-tending VSJ may have a tendency to identify in a fundamentally different way with his social peer group than a more collectivist-tending Arab VSJ, exposing potential points of strategic opportunity. In this, the bias of the analyst is central; whether she perceives an individual in the Western sense or a man-as-component of a family and social hierarchy will be a factor of her ability to “leverage” these distinct categories in her analysis—she must know that there is a difference in order to perceive one.

This brings us to the second maxim, that “everything you perceive in the world empowers you.” Consider that the ability to perceive the difference in cultural tendencies between our two imaginary American and Arab VSJ’s has empowered the analyst in our example such that she leverages a tool which another analyst, absent that perception, would lack. The circumstances in which this empowerment occurs are obviously important. For a security analyst engaged in the routine study of VSJ terrorists, the

¹⁹¹ For a cogent discussion on the nuance of the term “violent Salafi jihadist,” see Lisa M. Palmieri, “Would the U.S. Benefit from a Unified National Strategy to Combat Violent Salafi Jihadism?” (Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School, 2015), 69, <http://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/47838>.

¹⁹² Richard Buda and Sayed M. Elsayed-Elkhoudly, “Cultural Differences between Arabs and Americans Individualism-Collectivism Revisited,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 29, no. 3 (May 1, 1998): 487–92, doi:10.1177/0022022198293006.

benefit of this nuance is evident; for a lay person who is not routinely exposed or challenged with a circumstance in which these two social categories are salient, the empowerment of discerning those categories would perhaps be only a novelty. Likewise, a lay person unknowledgeable about the difference in these two cultural paradigms might be said to inhabit a fundamentally different actor-network than our analyst; for in such a case, ignorance has generated two distinct sets of “other.” Translating these distinct conceptions must then be accomplished through explanation of the cultural nuance in a way that is relatable between both the analyst and the lay person. For strategy development, the evident implications of this example are how to cultivate a mindset that checks ethnocentric bias and incentivizes nuanced analysis.

We have now also demonstrated the third maxim, that our analyst and the ignorant layman are both “defined by that which empowers [them].” The distinction drawn between these two individuals is that one holds power of division and discernment that the other does not. Whether this is useful to a third party will also be determined by whether such a quality is empowering to that third party—i.e., is the third party in a position or circumstance in which knowing or interacting with nuanced analysis would be empowering or irrelevant?

This leads us to the fourth maxim, that “contraversion is important.” The analyst must determine which of the imposed categories are useful and understand the implications of their use. For instance, to define a man—that is, a male—is also define that which is “not male;” to define a subject as VSJ is to draw a distinction with all that are “not VSJ;” and, to understand the frame of collectivism is to reify the category of “not collectivist,” and so on. Each new iteration of categorization and imposition of distinct traits upon the subject necessitates a recursive imposition of those distinctions upon all other subjects; those subjects—actor entities—not being directly contemplated in the analysis are nonetheless reconfigured in their relation to the novel subject and are thus redefined in terms of their relation to that subject as being more or less like the subject. This exemplifies the permeating relationality of the actor-network, as well as its plasticity.

We must remember, however, the fifth maxim: “Hierarchies and categories are merely descriptive frames superimposed atop an underlying network.” In the hypothetical analysis, there is, in fact, an underlying and homogenous actor-network. The frames and categories imposed are artifices of the analyst; each time an analytical subject is grouped or categorized, a simplification occurs, and with each simplification the analyst sacrifices complexity for convenience. The implication of this phenomenon is that nuance should be held at premium value, and that imposed categories and descriptions should always be questioned for their utility and the possibility that they might prevent otherwise viable strategic alternatives from emerging.

This brings us to the sixth and final maxim, that “things which empower multiple actors are likely to be contested.” Perhaps our analyst is composing a strategy alongside a colleague. Let us also suppose also that the VSJ subject of their analysis is Adam Gadahn, an American-born Al Qa’ida spokesman.¹⁹³ As the object of contention, let us consider Gadahn’s cultural tendency as a natural-born American who was born in Oregon. For the analyst and her colleague, a hypothetical point of contention might be that the analyst advocates for an understanding of Gadahn as an individualist and thus “different” from his (perhaps non-individualistic) non-American VSJ peers. Let us suppose that the colleague, however, refuses to entertain the nuance that Gadahn could be fundamentally different in this regard, and that the colleague insists that Gadahn “is just like the other terrorists.” On the other hand, let us consider Gadahn himself, who, if situated among Arab VSJ’s who tend toward collectivism, might, in the vein of social identity theory, be perceived by his peers as “different” due to his American upbringing, so perhaps Gadahn would take some pains to show his similarity and camaraderie with his peers in order to minimize any perceived differences. In both of these scenarios, the Gadahn’s cultural tendencies, however derived, are contested because they empower multiple actors. In the first scenario, the analyst is empowered due to her perceived advantage through understanding the nuance of cultural differences; her colleague is empowered through his desire to entertain a more simplified analysis, perhaps because of

¹⁹³ George Michael, “Adam Gadahn and Al-Qaeda’s Internet Strategy,” *Middle East Policy* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 135–52.

expediency, or a desire to not be seen by peers as someone who humanizes a perceived enemy, or myriad other reasons. In the second scenario, both Gadahn and his peers are empowered by the perception of his difference. For Gadahn, this potential is realized on several levels, most evidently as his eventual employment as a spokesman for Al Qa'ida who addressed the West directly with some projected air of authority as a former American citizen and the consequent elevation of his esteem within his peer group. We might also suppose that Gadahn would be viewed with some suspicion among his peers who held different cultural tendencies, perhaps also motivating some intrigue or opportunity that would not have otherwise occurred.

In any of these cases, whether dealing with a state actor or a non-state actor, an analyst must be attentive to the application of categories, types, and kinds; the cultural, institutional, and societal biases that underpin and entrain particular modes of thinking over time; and the expected utility of any particular nuance in detail or understanding as weighed against the costs in terms of verbosity, abstract complexity, and social and material barriers to efficient translation of analysis to other consumers who may lack the incentive to understand the analysis at a deep level of detail. In answering these imperatives, the analyst should again consider the six maxims: when developing a communicative product for a consumer, one must understand how that product will serve to empower the intended consumer and tailor the product accordingly. To couch this in terms of the present thesis and context: the strategic agency of the analytical product will be a function of how well it aligns with the strategic agency of the product's consumer.

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VII. CONCLUSION

Then I asked: “Does a firm persuasion that a thing is so, make it so?”

He replied: “All Poets believe that it does, and in ages of imagination this firm persuasion removed mountains; but many are not capable of a firm persuasion of any thing.”

—William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

A. THE POSSIBILITY OF A BETTER NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

Observing that the 2015 NSS has some considerable deficits, this thesis has asked how an ideal NSS might be constructed. The framework presented here—strategic agency—provides a mechanism for constructing a “strategic world.” Built out of power relations, the actors of the strategic world pursue their own persistence in leveraging other actors in a broad network. The strategic actor-network includes not only human actors and physical entities, but also more ephemeral concepts such as narratives and ideals particular to specific actors.

Strategic agency represents the intentionality of an actor which is driven toward reification of the particular punctuated actor-network (episteme of power relations) that affords that actor the maximum relative level of power. Every actor in the network has strategic agency, but not every actor in the network is equally relevant to analysis. A national security strategy must, in effect, make “informed choices” about where to focus its analysis. Some actors in its strategic world are necessarily more relevant than others in regards to time and potential impact on the “Strategos” enacting the strategy. Strategos defines problems in terms of understanding how the constituents of its world interact with each other and with Strategos; and, Strategos is limited because its own understanding is based on incomplete and subjective interpretations of the broader world.

The approach presented here might inform the construction of a national security strategy for the United States that makes no *a priori* assumptions about American ideals and intents in the world. This thesis has shown that the Strategos at the center of a

strategy is constituted and empowered by other “actors” like national values, elements of national power, and influence over other states, regions, and spheres of global society. To construct a strategy, each of these must be analyzed in order to construct an accurate, coherent representation of what the United States “is.” Only then can the strategy begin to build upon a foundation of its own identity in understanding the other, external actors of the world it seeks to engage with and influence, whether these are nation-states, terrorist groups, environmental or biological threats, or politicians and businesses.

B. THE REALITY OF COMPLEXITY IN STRATEGY

An effective strategy must evolve. At best, a strategy represents an accurate representation of reality that enables a purposeful actor—the Strategos—to achieve its aims in the strategic environment. At worst, a strategy consists of an assortment of truth-claims and vague fears. In reality, the world is complex, and no thinking human agent can enjoy omniscience or omnipresence. As a result, the thinking human agent constructs a mental model of the world and how it works. The strategic agency framework presented here attempts to capture the essence of that process and translate it into a formula that can be modeled as a system, discussed among analysts and planners, and leveraged to inform purposeful planning and action.

The challenges of implementing the strategic agency framework are myriad, but not insurmountable. Opportunities include exploring methods for how a world system may be constructed and modeled in a way that facilitates communication and collaboration by analysts, making the strategic insights of such project available to specialists and practitioners across the national spectrum, and educating leaders on the importance of nuanced messaging that strives to maintain an accurate, pluralistic representation of the real world while answering the motivational and identity needs of the nation-state actor.

Two underlying assumptions of this thesis are that strategy matters and that strategy must be self-consistent in its construction and concepts. The strategic agency framework, if realized, will answer these assumptions in perhaps a novel way: by de-

centering the agent of the strategy, yet recognizing the crucial role played by Strategos in its strategic world.

When asked why he chose to pursue a PhD in philosophy, homeland security scholar Christopher Bellavita answered, sublimely, “I liked ideas.” An idea is powerful thing. But, *all* things are powerful. As this thesis has shown, it is the power relations between our “selves” and all the things and ideas we discern in our world that define who we are. As we are thrown (to use Heidegger’s term) into the world, we cannot shield ourselves from the cacophony of our discursive experience which constructs us and defines us. When we construct a strategy, however, we ourselves lay the foundations of a conceptual, fictitious, and yet useful mirror of the reality we inhabit every day. We must take care, then, to build the “things” of the conceptual, strategic world in a way that pays homage to our own limited knowledge and to the potential of all actors to pursue their own existence in ways that may, to us, seem foreign, because the things we build into our strategic world will both enchain and empower the Strategos living at the center of that world—and, in turn, so our strategies will bind and guide us, for as much as we define them, we are defined by them.

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